Deep Waters

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The fishbowl on the corner of Sasha's desk needs cleaning. In the almost milky suspension a blundering blue-red furl—the Siamese fighting fish—noses the curved glass, enraged, gills outspread, gold-veined, its eyes watching Nevison. In his bedroom he crouches in Sasha's red corduroy chair, his ankle crossed over one knee. He is oblivious of his witness, to the little fury like a cupped psychopath. His mind rests on only his bare foot, which he looks upon as a concerned lover does a wince, and the feeling that his life, in a long, slow slide, is draining away out of it.

Nevison strokes the leech, nestled in the hollow just behind his Achilles tendon. It is a cool packet of darkness to him, ringed and soft and, apparently, gorged. With the same haunted look he has worn for the last dozen days he touches and nudges it, wondering at its strange silken dryness. The leech hunches, makes a shrugging movement. This is the new Nevison. The old Nevison would have been writhing in disgust all the late afternoon; he would have had to be tied down. He would never have allowed anything this damning to touch him for so long. The new Nevison stares at the leech huddled close to his flesh, nearly burrowing under. He can almost mistake it for a dark, raised scar. Sometimes he can feel his diffused touch through it and sometimes the ripple of his pulse, as if this leech is part of him.

Standing grey suited this morning in the jewelry store he owns, Nevison's blood tapped at his wrists as an elderly man in a black felt hat peered down into his storefront display. Mornings when sunlight shines into the case have been when Nevison has loved his store most. Points of light glimmered across the man's neck and jowls as he pressed his fingertips into pale ovals on the glass. His eyes were remote above the sparks, and when a faded blue pickup truck roared past on the street behind, screeching half a second later half a block away, he, to Nevison, looked marooned in front of his store, clinging at it. The man then scratched behind his ear, under his hat, in the silver stubble there, and crossed the street to Woolworth's.

No one has come into Nevison Jewelry in over a week. Has the town wised up and dismissed the value of gold and gemstones? Nevison thinks maybe and silently sides with them. In the glass case under his palms shone a gold wire construct, a dove, rendered two-dimensional and set with a dazzled-looking diamond eye. How could I have been unaware for so long, he wondered, bending over. The last few quiet days alone in his store he has detected infinitesimal flaws in nearly every piece he owns.

He locked up his store at noon and drove his Nova, the windows rolled down against the August heat, along the wavering country highways to his house.
on Sun Valley Lake. Glued above the radio on the blue vinyl dash was a thin, grey, rectangular digital clock. It’s been stuck in military time for the last month and the numbers flickered as the car jiggled. At the corner of Carl Bussy’s house—a name stenciled in red block lettering he passes every day on the cream-colored mailbox leaning guardedly back from the road—strands of alfalfa skittered in the wind across the pavement into successive straight lines, the broken bale slumping abandoned beside the ALL VEHICLES MUST STOP FOR STOPPED SCHOOL BUS sign, shedding. Turning west, the wheels of the Nova disrupted the flat, haphazard waves of alfalfa and there the air was dusty and tainted with something resinous, the smell of vast spaces that can be inhaled from an empty cardboard box.

Nevison drove on and at the Nishnabatna Bridge, the halfway point to his house, blinking at the wrathful sun off his hood, he tapped the digital clock so the numbers would hold. The display deepened black as a bruise under his fingers and a dark, purplish fluid oozed thickly from the bottom edge. Nevison poked at it—it held the image of his fingerprints for a moment—until his right front tire struck gravel and he jerked the car back. He’s had that clock for years. It will never come off the dash. Nevison threw back his arm across the top of the seat, his fingers on the vinyl passenger side headrest. He began to pull it up and push it down without thinking. As he turned onto his gravel driveway he was still tugging at it.

He undressed in the bathroom off his bedroom and pulled on a pair of frayed deep-blue swimming trunks that had dried over the shower door. Looking down he could barely see his name anymore stitched under the brassy-yellow anchor on the right leg.

He loped down the back stairs to the dock.

Lying in the sun all afternoon on the wooden raft he’d nailed together the summer before and covered with artificial grass, he wished for dry, cool winds, something from September. The heat of the sun was like a weight on his skin, especially on his dark swim trunks, and that weight reminded him of another weight across his hip, rolling forward, lolling back down on him, her hands gripping his ribs, then rising to knead his pectorals in rhythm to the heart she felt beneath, smoothing, lifting, as if trying to shape the flesh there. In his swim trunks his cock lengthened and he rolled on his side, looking out across the plastic grass shaved closer than any putter’s green, watching the terrible glare of Sun Valley Lake flash at him like a warning.

She must have been planning for weeks, he told himself there, furtively packing when he was in town or on the lake. In his mind the picture was of her picking up each object in the house, weighing its economy, fairness, the emotional content within. In the end she took very little: her clothing that wasn’t outdated, a jewelry box that when the brass key was wound played an timid, unrecognizable tune, a cactus, a box of letters from the basement, that was sealed shut with the same
yellowed book tape it had when she moved in, five Hummel figurines. One of a boy and a dog struggling against wind; the dog, eyes wide and white, ears whipped back, the boy, holding down his ceramic hat, his red lips parted. And two pairs of boys and girls leaning forward on their toes, eyes closed, to kiss, that Nevison thinks he has never seen arranged on the shelf in the living room so they would face the other. Instead they had stood in a row on the edge in front of the glazed pots Sasha had thrown, their knees slightly bent, seemingly always ready to leap.

There were no towels or furniture missing. It seemed to Nevison that the place she has gone to has been prepared, as if she is living in a hotel somewhere. Maybe one with a clear, blue pool and chlorine, he thinks, dipping his fingers in the lake. And tourists. In the early days when they were living in a rented mobile home on their plot of lake side property, with a damp run-down fishing cottage Nevison was building onto to be their home, she compared living on the lake to a perpetual, lazy vacation, the sort of vacation she had had as a little girl one week a summer in northern Iowa, at Lake Okoboji, at her grandfather’s cottage. He remembered her tapping a fingernail to a map once; he remembered she called the place Miller’s Cove. She had said every year the lake would flip-flop, the cold water on the bottom of the lake would slip over the warm top water and algae would thicken, cloud the lake water in the still cove over.

She had waited, trying not to let on in that last moment while he was untying the boat, trying not to put any meaning in her decline to ride around the lake at sunset with him like they always did, her hair flying behind her, that last night. He remembered her as a silhouette on the steps to the house and himself as the fool, throttling back and disappearing around the red buoyed point as the light bled away from the rim of the world. She had Scotch taped a yellow note to the dusty face of the television that night. He had seen it through the sliding glass door as he was coming onto the deck. Her handwriting was sharp and tropical green. He had read the first line untying his wet, darkened shoes. Poised over the television on his hands and knees, the antennae bowed against the wall, he had read the rest, over and over until it was part of him: he had knocked the television and its stand over in his recklessness.

On his raft this afternoon he had a dream. He and Sasha were little kids playing on her bed in her parents’ house with stuffed animals of extraordinary size. A bear, a lion, a monkey with a coiled tail, an afghan hound with white fur touching its glass eyes. There was a spot of spaghetti sauce on Nevison’s shirt front and he felt like a ditherer. “I love you,” he said in the dream. Sasha, not laughing now (she had been laughing before), looked at him shocked and began to cry. She hit him on the chest with a pillow. He had wanted to explain why he couldn’t say it before, but she wouldn’t stop. He grabbed her wrists, but then a giant panda toy was upon him,
tearing out his throat.

He woke up cold and in the shade of the trees along his small stretch of shore. The raft was bumping against the large, smooth rocks there; the blue nylon rope he'd forgotten to tie to the dock was sunk in the doubtful water around them, under the frothy, brown scum. He waded through the sticky muck, his feet slow and deep in it, dragging the raft with him. At the dock he tied it up tight and headed for the house. At the top of the steps he noticed how wild the lawn had grown. He started for the slanting yellow metal shed behind the garage to heft the gas can beside the mower to judge if he had enough to drive into town. While sidestepping the sagging bare clothesline strung between two maples he tripped over a hidden tree root. "Sly bitch!" he yelled as he staggered forward, his muddy feet sliding in the grass. He didn't recognize the actual words he was saying; they were in him, circling close to the surface inside. Nevison turned and walked to the deck. He didn't care about the lawn pulling through his toes. When he ran from the house after reading the note he had seen the Nova still in the drive. Someone came and took her away, he thought wildly. "She can't even confront me?" he had breathed. His feet slid in the gravel then and he was spread across the hood of the Nova, the night sky flung over him, blank and staring. "Coward bitch! Sly bitch!" slipped from him as he rolled off, skidding in the rocks, running mindlessly, fast as his feet could carry him.

The plastic grass had made little impressions all over the right side of his body. While hosing off his feet at the side of the house, he found the leech.

The involuntary picture in his head now is of him quietly rolling off the raft and slipping silently into the black water, his arms swinging over his head, his fingertips in a mock gesture look like they are reaching up, but they are sinking down and fading out. He thinks, God, I could have drowned out there today. The next image is immediate, of something bloated and white, almost clothed in small, smooth, moving, black spots.

The fighting fish circles, raging silently in the fishbowl. A pack of matches are tipped against the ashtray behind the fishbowl. The leech must come off, he thinks. Heaped in the ashtray are the leavings of Sasha's cigarettes, each butt wearing the mark of her particular shade of lipstick which always reminded Nevison of the color of blood just as it cools. Sometimes when he would look at her suddenly all he could see would be her mouth like a wound. With the matches, he lights a cigarette he found tangled in the speaker wires along the base board beside the desk and sucks in to make the end glow. He hasn't smoked since he gave it up eight years ago. Then, at the beginning of his marriage, he was often short of breath and it terrified him. He woke up nights next to Sasha, shaking, unable to get air to the bottom of his lungs. He would feel pinned to the bed, but it was only an arm or leg of Sasha's. He would pad into the living room and hug himself. The air was so

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humid off the lake in the summertime, he told her. He quit, switched to crunching lemon drops. Sasha kept on, blowing at the ceiling, content with her mentholated lights and the crystals he had read about that were forming in her lungs.

Even now there are lemon drops in the suit coat on the bed behind him. He inhales deeply and gags, the smoke of the dry, dust-speckled cigarette like chimney soot, shooting out of his mouth. He coughs. His eyes narrow through the haze, as if he sees long, grainy distance in it. One puff won’t murder me, he thinks. He takes another draw and finds it smoother. He senses another arbitrary barrier fall, another personal statistic change. He senses himself, a Nevison resolved to raw numbers.

He holds the tip glowing like a brand near the leech like a delicate surgical instrument. The red light reflects off the smooth skin (back?) that begins to ripple with movement. He hesitates. The ash grows long on the cigarette. The night Sasha left him he couldn’t stand being alone, running in front of windows of houses blue with televisions flickering. The moon had hung massive and unhealed-looking behind the trees. He had charged back, down to his dock and into his boat. He shot through the water to Brent Desefaunt’s house, steering standing up, stomping his feet on the floorboard, the waves tossing the nose of his boat. He saw himself from above, slitting the glossy water. At the Desefaunt’s dock he jumped on and tied the boat to the pilings as it slowed. He sprinted to the back porch, his breath thick, and rang and rang the glowing doorbell, one note over and over. The house was dark except for a floor lamp in the living room which Nevison knew was run by a timer from when he and Sasha were over once, sitting and drinking highballs. The sun was down and the room was greying when Nevison had moved his arm behind Sasha to touch it. Brent’s wife had lifted her hand, said, “Wait,” and the lamp amazingly lit. When the two Desefaunts had met in the kitchen for more Scotch and Aerosol cheese Nevison whispered into Sasha’s hair, “This house is hers and no one else’s.”

No one came to the door. There were marks on the plate glass where Nevison had cupped his eyes. As he stepped away, his arm brushed the Desefaunt’s gas grill that was set on bricks the color of dark chocolate. Nevison jumped, yelling, “Bitch!” His voice echoed above the black water, twice. He threw open the lid of the grill and hot air poured upwards on his chest and face like judgement. The gas wasn’t on. He looked at his arm. “I just missed them,” he said to the burn.

A wisp of smoke and vapor escapes as he touches the cherry of the cigarette to the leech. The nervous system of the invertebrate understands this message Nevison is sending and Nevison is free. He lifts the leech off his foot and the red swelling there and lays it on the desk. He knows he should flush it away down the toilet—it curls and uncurls—but he doesn’t want to touch it just now. His eyes are on the cigarettes in Sasha’s ashtray. Each one, he notices for the first time, looks like it was stubbed out with a particularly violent twist, as if by someone under great
strain. He drops his spent cigarette in among them. All the signs and warnings were there, he says in his mind. I just didn’t see them.

He sits back in her chair and looks at the ash tray which, from this angle, is warped and distorted through the glass and water of the dirty fishbowl. The Siamese fighting fish is iridescent; it roils the water with passion, lunging up, dropping back. I should clean it out, he thinks, and save her fish. He leans forward. Through the bowl the cigarette butts look like tubular animals he has seen pictures of taken in the deepest waters of the ocean. It’s amazing, he thinks, that anything can live under such pressures.

-Frank J. Nixon