



A SCHOOL OF FISH (OR STUDENTS)

Jennifer Van Vliet

Shattered blades of grass pierced through the light cloth of her top and splintered against the thick flesh of her back. The worn corduroy bag flattened beneath her head did not fare as well; unseen, a single grass blade cried victory as its life seeped away, through the ragged, infinitesimal wound that it had caused—its triumph. Bleach blonde at the tip and pallid through the stem, the blade wanted nothing more than to die but alas! tip and stem remained one through some freak chance, held together by a single thread of verdancy.

But back to the head. It was a well shaped head, if heads can be said to be well shaped, as round as a basketball, though not quite as orange, and attached to a neck that was singularly neck-like. Muscles, often strained under the weight of the head, relaxed backward now and let the basketball plop against the bag which, as had been earlier mentioned, had recently lost a battle with a blade of grass who was now cursing the fate that granted it life—

Inside of the head was a thought—a single thought, a small thought, a thought disproportionate to the size of the head that contained it—but criticism is reserved for those with many thoughts, for of what use is more than one to a person?—and it drew her entire attention.

“I am a light source,” she announced, quite abruptly.

Her eyes were wide open, and blank, and fixed—who can

say what another's eyes see? but they were unquestionably fixed on the sky, I can tell you that—with an intensity reserved, in the general course of things, for only the most startling of spectacles (chocolate, or nudists in church). She wanted to taste the words again; she could not fully grasp their meaning; she liked to say things more than once because repetition created a greater effect; whatever the case, she cried, more softly but with more anguish:

“I am a light source!”

It all started when she strutted across the bridge in her high platforms and noticed the rail. The rail was, to put it simply, effervescent but dull—unique but standard—long but short—wide but narrow—a barrier and an idea. She did not stare at the rail—no, her astute mind absorbed the complexities of the rail in less time than it has taken for me to explain them—but instead let one hand rest gently, leisurely against its cool (but warm) surface.

It would have ended there had she not noticed the fish. As she stood proudly, absently at the rail, patting it in the possessive manner of one who truly understands its nature, the water rippled beneath her. In a moment of weakness, her eye drifted down to the rail, just far enough down for the rippling water to be within her peripheral vision. She started. She leaned forward. The ripples became a wave—the wave became a motion—the motion became a splash—then suddenly the whole lake was parting before her, at the bridge, and it was filled with fish, starving fish, plaintive fish—fish begging her name, screaming to be fed!

Well, perhaps not. It is a true fact, however, that a single fish, or maybe two or three, followed her as she slowly, warily, inched farther along on her journey across the bridge. Why do they follow her so? she thought. She had never seen a person feed these fish—yet a school (for by now it would not be beyond the stretch of imagination to say that a school of fish had gathered beneath her) of fish followed her then with, she could only suspect, hopes of a bread crumb or perhaps a spare chip.

What was she to a fish? She was obviously a something—a something to be followed, with purposes perhaps nefarious, if nothing else—but was she necessarily a living something? Her lips, placed slightly closer to her left ear than to her right ear, pursed. Her eyes squinted. Her eyebrows—for she had two eyebrows, and very fine eyebrows they were, of a pale gold color that did not quite match the orange of her hair—slanted in a bemused fashion toward her nose, which was a tad bit too pointed for her face—but who can judge such things? it is certain, though, that a nose job would not be an untoward move for her to consider—and a tad bit too far from her lips.

It was necessary that she consider this—her importance to the fish—but it was particularly necessary that she do so away from the fish. She could hardly contemplate the issue with impartiality when the object of confusion was swimming directly beneath her feet, after all. Her interest should have broken there—but it could not. She was too far on her way; she had already begun to consider her meaning to the fish; she had no choice but to look around her further . . .

. . . and so she noticed that the lampposts shone golden against the purple sky, casting shadows across arid stretches of grass and haloing trees with their unnatural light. The lake was black but white rushing water spewed from its depths in the form of a fountain—daylight masked the crash of the water but in lamplight—in lamplight—

Dingy grey concrete became an ivory paved road, arching in and out of murky stains and gilded at the edges.

The small elm tree acquired a stately gleam, as if immune to the shifting shadows of the night.

Her own hand, when lifted gently into the transforming light—for yes, she had drifted toward the light source, into the light, without conscious thought—without an idea why, other than that it throbbed and waved across the smooth expanse of sky above her—trembled but was otherwise untouched.

She dropped her purse to the ground—traumatized blades of grass fought but had not even the voice to sob aching, horrid defeat—and folded her body down after. Her

basketball head with its imperfect nose and its off center lips weighed against her corderoy bag—weighed against the last soldier, the last man standing, who begged the world to let him die but who could not overcome his own strength—and her left ear itched. She did not scratch it.

The man-made light overcame the sky; to her, there was no sky, but only dark and light and spots caused by staring too long at the boundary. She swayed back and forth with the pulsing lamp, and light soaked into her in the form of relief—relief of blindness, of ignorance, of the unnatural and the familiar—and she realized—and she realized—

The light was obviously a something—a something to be followed, by creatures with purposes perhaps nefarious—but it did not, necessarily, seem to be a living something, an acknowledged something, a thinking something.

She sighed, “I am a light source.”