

The Keeper (4,121 words)

In the warm, amber dim of the Seattle aquarium, a small woman with kelp-colored hair gazes upward, into masses of fish weaving through the water above her head. The central tank is huge, with incurving glass walls that create a bell of air at the base; the air is fusty with a damp, low-tide smell. Perch hover along the walls of the tank, noses bulbous and finely speckled, nuzzling up to a long-limbed man in a wetsuit, neoprene hood and scuba gear. He is suspended in the water above the woman, surrounded by a watery grey fog of fish food. Kay watches as his gloved hands release white scraps in slow motion, courting the sharks, the foil-skinned tuna. Inside the mask, his eyes seem to be holding conversations with the fish. Near Kay, a little girl perched on a man's shoulders asks in a penetrating, tinny voice, "Daddy! That man- where is his *home*?"

"That's the keeper, honey." The father answers. "He belongs with the fish."

Kay feels at home here. The aquarium makes her feel more alive than usual- her fingertips, normally best for listening, seem to be speaking to her here. She cranes her neck to watch a white-bellied halibut fly through the water above her. His dorsal fin shimmers thickly along one edge of him; he is a thick wedge of fish, eyes bugged up like eggs and swiveling independently, both on one side of the half-moon slash of mouth. Kay looks again for the diver, but he is gone. She wanders off down the hallway, catching her reflection in a pencil of light: her mouth is hanging open. She has forgotten herself again. First things often strike her like that, but this is her third time here.

Kay has lived in Seattle her whole life. When her mother was still alive, she remembers a greener place, swings, houses spaced farther apart. She isn't good at remembering anything about the time before their car accident, when suddenly everything was different. After her head trauma, finishing high school wasn't an option and, in the absence of any relatives, the state had taken over. Home became an apartment on Third and James, and for a while a social worker came daily to make her dinner and to try to expand her world beyond the apartment walls. Kay had done that on her own finally, by touching the

The Keeper (4,121 words)

same places on the stairway walls and adding one- only one- stairstep to the route each time she ventured out. In six months after the wreck, she could go all the way down the street towards the waterfront. The social worker- there had been several, she didn't know their names and really couldn't remember faces, but they each had the apartment key- took her to the homeless shelter for meals, until Kay learned the necessary touchstones along the brick walls, and the smooth green places on the streetlamp posts. By the time she turned 21, she had discovered and calibrated the bus system, and now she knew the touchstones to unlock the aquarium.

Kay walks on from the central tank to visit the canary rockfish, *Sebastes pinniger*. None of the other fish seem so alike, so safe in their school as these. The pupil in the wedge-shaped head is gold-rimmed and elliptical. On the peculiar red-gold body, the lateral line is livid white; each fish has a black spot on its dorsal fin and each is exactly the same. One lies behind rocks and darts out towards Kay's fingertip where it rests lightly on the glass; Kay does not recoil. The first time she came to the aquarium, she got no further than here, immersed in watching the easy moves of fish among fish. She is keeping count, seeking reassurance. The rockfish have been exactly the same 3 times in a row. She can move on.

She walks outdoors to the tidewater exhibit, trailing her fingers along the fog-wet walkway railing. The sounds of traffic from the viaduct almost overcome the plish and suck of water on the pilings below. The aquarium is built on a pier along Elliot Bay, and the concrete highway hangs close above it. Inside the exhibit's wire mesh sanctuary, tufted puffins and marbled murrelets battle over a herring. Kay watches the birds fly underwater in the glassed-in estuary, their plump bodies like bullets with attenuated wings. She can hear the houndlike barks of seals from here; a hot quality in their noise repels her. She turns back to the dark quiet of the indoor hallways lined with tanks.

The dim, cool halls of the aquarium pull her along, the glass of each glowing tank a touchpoint. Kay stops in front of a tank full of tiny gobies, their transparent fins strumming the water. There is a spotted

The Keeper (4,121 words)

prawn gobie, *Amblyeleotris guttata*, a hotdog-shaped white fish with a relatively big head and tiny filigrees of fluorescence around its gills. It lies on its belly in a divot in the sand floor of the tank and tumbles a teaspoon of coral sand into its mouth, shivering its lips until the grains fall, like marbles or offspring, from its gill covers.

Kay lingers here, watching for a different fish, *Synchiropus splendidus*: the mandarin fish, a dragonet. Less than an inch long, it hides behind dark lobes of coral, with the face of a rainforest frog: marbled bronze with fine dots of orange, erubescant eyes, green and orange reticulations over a blue body. She'd encountered it on her first visit to the aquarium, and the richness of its detail and coloring had been an electrifying jolt. It was as if in the warm, dark confines of this place, so calming and comforting, Kay had heard a sharp voice, speaking her name. Unsettled, that first visit, she'd immediately backtracked out of the aquarium and gotten herself home.

In the next weeks, she'd managed the bus trip to the public library, and had taken out and perused every book on tropical fish identification in their collection; she could find nothing more beautiful than this fish. Words did no justice to it. Even more notable, she actually wanted to visit the aquarium again, she felt something other than vagueness. Still, she had to wait until she felt right, until her turbulence subsided and her internal order was back in place, sorted out. This took weeks until the second visit; but after that, only days until the third visit.

Now, on her third venture into the dark halls, Kay finds she can read the fish, the movements of heads, mouths and gills; their placement in the water. In her customary trance, she envisions how the pale gray blur of her face must swim by the fish, only one blur of thousands each day in the dark hallways.

Kay stretches her arm to the next tank, anchors a finger to the glass and pulls herself to it. This is a Pacific lobster, as big as a cat, its carapace a web of black over blue, yellow and spots of orange. Two

The Keeper (4,121 words)

spiny antennae, twice its length, sweep backwards from its head like rats' tails. There are bottle brushes on the ends of its slender legs, and flat, fringed swimmerets arch out as the legs and mouthparts explore in slow motion. Kay sways in front of the glass, absorbing the rich colors. She feels tears starting up. The squeaking sound as the tips of the lobster's legs touch her fingertips through the glass strikes her as melancholy, and make her stomach coil with grief. A tiny shiver flickers over her back, and she turns quickly to see a tall shadow moving away from her in the water-filtered light of the hallway. She is suddenly exhausted and turns to leave, to walk toward home, where the traffic noises nail her down, where she can count the milestones and knows the numbers of the proper buses.

The keeper, Don- still feeding, always feeding- stands above the smaller tanks that illuminate the dark hallways of the aquarium. Behind the tanks a black sheet of plywood conceals the linear benches on which he stands to feed and clean the tanks. He is head and shoulders above the level of the water but can't be seen from the hallway. He is an angular, tall man with durable bones and friendly, outdoorsy lines in his face. The only time Don is visible to aquarium visitors- although he watches the crowd daily through narrow cracks in the plywood screens behind the tanks- is when he is immersed in the main tank, floating with the fish in his neoprene skin. This suits Don very well.

When he was 6 or so, Don fiercely wanted a kitten. He imagined it as something like a toy but magically alive- you didn't have to wind it up. You couldn't predict exactly what it would do. Then, when he found one in a culvert out back of their apartment house, he hid it in his jacket. Zipped in front of his stomach, it clung and purred in tiny, soft, wet explosions. His mother said it was sick, and took it away somewhere. After that, when animals- kittens, puppies, raccoons- came to him, he hid them.

Sometimes they died, until he learned what to feed them. Later, wiser, he'd take them to the local vet, who got used to the fact that when the boy in dirty Keds with the red wagon trundled into the parking lot, there would be a new orphan in the back ward. All these animals went through Don on their way to

The Keeper (4,121 words)

homes of some kind, he believed; often they'd end up in the pound, or be humanely euthanized, though Don was kept oblivious of their ends. Whether he willed it or not, he believed he was a magnet for the helpless and directionless; not a savior, just somehow involved in the process.

Don would rather live right here, in the aquarium, but settles for an economy studio in an apartment house on lower Queen Anne Hill. He doesn't know his neighbors, but guesses they are college students from the occasional music at 2 am. College is something he should get back to, but it's been a few years since he started a biology degree, and from the vantage point of 28 he feels far too worldly to go back. Besides, he's too busy. Don is at work from 5 am to 7 pm, seven days a week, and has been known to spend the night at work.

The aquarium's board of directors, fearing burnout, forces him to take a couple of weeks off yearly. At first, Don tried spending his vacation with family in Sacramento and was miserable. Then he discovered snorkeling in Thailand, and cheap living on the beach. One morning, while he snorkeled over the reef surrounding a limestone island near Phuket, he was startled by a growing shadow approaching through the silty blue depths of the Andaman Sea. A blue dome, enlarging and becoming ever more defined at the edge of his vision. His heart picked up speed with its advance, he felt it walloping his ribs like a separate beast; even his fear was startling. He turned to face the thing, though he wanted nothing so much as to leap up above the water and fly. It was suddenly just a grouper- but big, maybe the size of a Volkswagen Beetle- approaching, dreamlike, over the dappled sand. Its humped back and head passed under him.

Don, relieved, turned back toward the shore, staying in the shallows with his masked face flat on the water. A sea snake- red, white, black bands flashing- flashed up out of a coral ridge below him, just inches under his belly: venomous, irritable. Don felt the water turn electric, his heart hammering. Convulsively kicking, he fled towards the beach, arms flailing. With every stroke and kick,

The Keeper (4,121 words)

he felt exposed, as if something might nip him in the armpit or groin. He laid on the hot white sand, freed of mask, snorkel and fins. He missed the fish he knew, his sense of immunity in the neoprene suit. He could stand on the catwalk above the aquarium tanks and pour tiny shrimp into certain death, and he was only an active spectator, not really a part of the equation. Not himself actually food, or actually a predator. He spent the rest of that trip reading in a beach hammock and watching the bare breasts of European tourists.

Here in Seattle, Don is comfortable on the margin of the city and the Puget Sound. He enjoys feeding them all- fish, marine mammals, birds, invertebrates. Now, he looks down into the tank of translucent jellyfish, cross lit against the black walls of their tank like jelly angels. The bells contract, trailing and flipping fine fringes of white; long, even, peristaltic pulses. Beside them, sea nettles with orange bells and roiling fringe drift as if eviscerated. He ladles brine shrimp into the tank and watches them fizzle in tiny directions, swept nonetheless into the central diaphanous gullets of the lymphoid jellyfish. Even now, after ten years of working here, Don is fascinated by how they move in the currents of their captors. "You have zip for personality," he finds himself telling the jellyfish. "Not compared to the gobies, say. High points for style, though."

Today is Kay's fourth visit; her world is expanding. She has made it to the jellyfish tank, stands there with one fingertip resting on the glass. She is only a few feet below where Don stands, hidden behind the black backdrop. The rhythm of the luminescent jellyfish has transfixed her; she seems not to hear his disembodied voice.

Don has noticed her before. Unlike kids, who rub their noses against the glass, she merely touches a fingertip to each tank as she goes. She is methodical, talismanic about her touching. She could have

The Keeper (4,121 words)

heard him talking to the jellyfish, but Don knows she can't see him. He watches the light of the tank slanting across Kay's twin sweeps of red-gold hair, the jellyfish rhythm reflected off her eyelashes.

Late this afternoon, when the crowd is thinning, Don walks through the cave-like public hallway lined by tanks, checking the glass for nose marks and smudges. He gets caught up in a clutch of schoolkids, none taller than his waist. They name each animal with relish. "It's a clam! It's a shark! It's a grouper, stupid!" Don rounds a corner in the clutch of children, and sees Kay, still transfixed in front of the jellyfish, head cocked as if listening to them.

Days later, the next time Don sees Kay at the aquarium, he finds himself following her. He gets close, inches behind her as she watches the spiny lobster gesticulate, the bright fruit-colored nudibranchs wave the tiny fronds of their antennae. She takes too long, seems to have too much to think about at each tank. Don follows, trying not to notice that he is learning her habits and predicting how long it will take her to reach the jellyfish, how much work he can get done before he can perch, hidden, above the jellyfish tank and watch her as she stares, mesmerized. And speak, again, if she is alone.

Many times over the next months, late in the afternoons, Kay drifts around the corner to the jellyfish tank. Few others visit so late, especially on very rainy or very fine days. Don stands hidden above the tanks and talks to her. He is surprised at how much he has to tell her. He tells her about the aquarium, about how it feels to be there alone, first thing in the morning. How the eyes of the fish are luminous in their night, those that troll still trolling, those that sleep still drifting, hovering in their rocky parking places. He does this in a deep, soft voice. She never seems to hear him, she never watches anything but the pulsing jellyfish, their lacy protoplasm, their mindless and exultant repetitions. She never moves her eyes from the velvet backdrop of water and dark. She has a way of holding her mouth pressed shut, then opening her lips briefly- like a fish gulps water at the surface, Don thinks- then pressing her mouth straight again. So she is humming! He is surprised to discover this, in the spaces between his

The Keeper (4,121 words)

words. Her voice is small and high, agile, flowing around the song. He wants her to learn his voice and wonders if she might follow it, disembodied. Her eyes behind her glasses are vivid blue, the whites lit by reflected light, the pupils large with the ambient dark. And perhaps with listening, he thinks; the blue of the slender iris is so concentrated and tart.

Kay begins coming in late, just at five, and the quietness with which she moves, the high thin wisp of music as she walks, clears the space around her, even in a crowd. Don regularly drifts behind her in the hallways, not close enough to scare her, thinking maybe he is invisible to her. Kay is watching the clownfish, how they lie in the fleshy cups and tendrils of a pink anemone, lolling in the poisonous fronds, rubbing their orange, blunt-nosed heads on its watery billows. She leans toward the little orange-and-white striped fish, all ten fingers pressed against the glass as if to feel what they feel. Don, standing close behind her, smells wet wool and a pale, citrusy smell, perhaps cologne, perhaps shampoo. His nose is almost over her head. Briefly, Kay leans back against him. Her fingers, slim and cool from the glass, slide into his palm. They move a little, and his heart speeds: he thinks of the sea snake. She sighs, and he feels the air leaving through her fingers. The fingers slip away, her warmth moves off, she disappears from their shared reflection in the tank. He turns, and she is growing into the murky distance of the aquarium hallway, seeming to expand as her edges turn fuzzy.

As she walks away from the clownfish tank, every detail is now startlingly clear to Kay, though the tall man does not appear behind her again in the glass. Here is the cowfish- a fishy box of yellow, dotted with black, flat marginate eyes and a tacked-on purse of a mouth. Four tiny fins waggle the box through the water; an absurd polka-dotted tail steers. Solitary, the fish wavers over the white sand. Kay wishes it a mate, fish eggs, a populace of cowfish. In the next tank, a pajama cardinalfish- *Shaeramia nematoptera*- drifts in a crevice, a dissolute expression on its green face, a plaid pattern of scales on its

The Keeper (4,121 words)

sides, a pennant dangling off its dorsal fin. And here are yellow-headed jawfish- white slips of things, rising alertly like prairie dogs from sand burrows. Kay thinks they look after her as she moves on. For once, she doesn't feel solitary. She walks faster. Here are the flashlight fish- the only signs of life are the bright, brief beacons from the depths of the blackened tank.

She backtracks to the central tank, stands alone in the bell of air beneath the fish. Tonight, there is no black-suited young man living in the tank. The sharks circle and circle, always above her eye level, flat white bellies constantly moving overhead, moving in order to breathe. Shark eyes- surprised, yellow, round- stuck onto the edges of bullet-shaped heads. Shark mouths, deeply undercut, half open, tasting tasting. Big teeth. Kay feels tears again, a hot upwelling in the top of her chest. She turns and leaves for the cool dim hardness of the sidewalk.

All week, any week, people crowd the aquarium, stand pressed close to the glass. Hot breath and sometimes oily noses, or perhaps the wet chin of a child, leave the glass sticky by Sunday night. Don is always the last to leave, cleaning the tank windows with spray and rag. He feels anesthetized as the compressors hum, as if the floor might tip and tilt with the waves, the diesel smell of a trawler engine filter through the close, mudflat smell of the aquarium. He feels the place seethe and settle down for the night around him, at least a thousand fish brains, at least a million fish thoughts needling through these fusty hallways. As he cleans tonight, he finds himself looking for the particular imprint of Kay's fingertips, but she hasn't been back for a month. He walks past the jellyfish, the formal, diaphanous white moon jellies, the bright orange sea nettles tumbling over their own reflections.

His only warning is a slim drift of citrus in the air- Don almost steps on Kay, who is sitting cross-legged on the dark hallway floor, in front of the jellyfish. He lurches, startled, but she doesn't look at him. Her

The Keeper (4,121 words)

hands lie flat and limp on the floor. Don is afraid to touch her, afraid not to, frightened of her absorption. He opens his mouth to turn loose calming words, but then he sees that she is singing, between deep inhalations, her eyes fixed on the tanks. He bends close to hear, like a priest in a confessional, eyebrows lifted and face half-turned away, privy to a dialog between her and some god.

Her voice is high and small, her mouth moves quickly, compactly. He really doesn't know this song, or does he? "*Myripristis chryseres*," she is singing. "*Myripristis pralinia*, *Sargocentron diadema*, *Psuedanthias squammipinnis*, *Pterois volitans*, *Synchriopus splendidus*." He passes his hand in front of her face, and her eyes do not follow nor break their gaze. He straightens back up, folds his arms, and waits. She goes on and on. She doesn't repeat herself. It is a mantra of the entire aquarium, he realizes, the entire inventory. Their Latin names, genus and species. Don stands there and listens, stomach growling. He needs to finish the lights out, the locking of doors.

He walks outside to finish his rounds. A few of the fur seals have molded themselves to rocks for the night. Sea otters bob, dark slips and streaks on the silver surface of their pool. The winter sun is going down over the Puget Sound, a tawny stain in the clouds to the southwest. The aquarium is at last quiet, save wind and waterslap and the overhead din of traffic. A final seal hauls itself out of the saltwater, slick and doglike, spine slung between shoulders and pelvis, and melts onto a rock. Don stands watching the animals bedding down and the animals watch him.

There must, he thinks, have been people who evolved as the keepers of beasts. People who survived and reproduced because of their ability to attract and keep, not just kill and eat, the wild creatures. Some ancestor of modern man who slept far from the fire, so the small servals or civet cats or dingoes might creep in close to huddle against his back for warmth. Someone who held a half-eaten bone for hours, waiting and waiting for a wet nose to sniff- hysterical with caution- and finally give in to hunger, who hunched over a stolen litter of spotted kits and worked milk from her breasts onto their

pink tongues. From these came those people with eyes for the beasts, an inborn sense of their senses. There were no distinguishing marks, thinks Don, except that dogs might single you out for devotion. Animals would always watch him, give him their eyes if he came into view. Even the fish seemed to focus on him. Perhaps he was one of them, though the wild beasts in the wild frightened him. He is likewise frightened of this singing figure, this small woman whose presence makes him talk, hungry to fill the space between them. He shivers, then goes back to the jellyfish.

The light from the jellyfish tank dances on her face like the aurora borealis. Kay's eyes meet his as he approaches, and her mouth is still. Don reaches down and gives her his hand, pulls her to her feet. Huddled, her hair falling forward, she fits well into the denim web of his arm. He can feel her shoulders shake with hard hiccups. When she stops hiccupping, he wonders, will she purr against his shirtfront like the kitten? Where will he take her next? He is completely incapable of caring for her, but he cups his hand over the top of her head; her hair is orangey strands, silky like fur. How would it feel, her hair, if suspended by warm currents? If she lay in his arms like the jellyfish, pulsing in the watery light?