

TRUTH
UNTRUTH
WE DON'T
KNOW...
COVER ART

storyscape Literary Journal

[MISSION](#) [ARCHIVE](#) [STORES](#) [SUBMIT](#) [DONATE](#)
[EVENTS](#) [MASTHEAD](#) [BLOG](#)

The Aquarium

Kelly Grogan

Weekends when Ruby was young and her father was home, he would drive her into the city to visit the aquarium. He often travelled for work, and she would grow up to think of him as a kind of ghost, only half-present in the memories she carried. But inside the aquarium, her father's warm, slender hand wrapped around hers while they walked through the narrow tunnels that carved a glass path underwater. She shrieked and giggled when manta rays glided overhead and begged for presents at the gift shop. She ate rock candy on the way home, and her fingers were sticky and sweet at bath time.

Ruby always wanted children of her own — two of them. She dreamed of the warm summer days when she'd take them to the aquarium. "What's that, Mama?"

ISSN 1941-3157
Copyright © 2007–2019 Storyscape Journal

[f](#) [t](#) [✉](#) | [elmsj](#)

Donate with PayPal

they would ask, pointing their fingers at the strange creatures floating past, faces lit blue in the deep-water light. And she would speak the names of the fish slowly, so that they learned.

So many of the names were descriptive of what the fish resembled. Angelfish, large and luminous. Butterflyfish with winged fins and long, proboscis noses, bodies brushed with black spots. Lion fish with fringed manes swirling in a halo around them. Opalescent Rainbow Parrotfish that glittered just like the fish in her favorite children's book, the one that gave its scales away. Other times, the placards read like poems in a language she'd never heard before. *Pseudanthia. Taeniatus. Lyretail Anthias. Symphysodon.* The words would slip out like secrets and her children would repeat them back to her, a private language that belonged to them only.

"What's that, Mama?" they would ask, again and again; and again and again she would tell them.

But it didn't happen that way. When it happened Ruby was too young, not even out of high school. She didn't know what to do, or who to tell. She moved through her days wrapped in dense fog. She was certain everyone could see straight through to the tiny cells multiplying inside her. After that one time, it never



happened again. Not then, when she wasn't ready, and not now that she was.

She had loved going to the aquarium so much that for her birthday her parents gave her an aquarium of her own, a ten-gallon tank glimmering with purple and blue rocks and live seaweed, a filter that bubbled through the night. And six tiny neon tetras floating in the water, still encased in the plastic bag the pet store had put them in. Ruby named all of the tetras — Arabella, Marcella, Ponyo, Goliath, Tendril, and Piper — and each time her mother took her to the pet store and the clerk lifted a new, writhing fish from its tank she gave it a name too.

As a teenager Ruby had walked to the clinic alone. It took three tries over the course of two weeks before she gathered the courage to enter. A nurse gave her a pill and a paper cup full of water. Ruby didn't remember seeing the nurse's eyes. Had she looked at her? Had she simply gone through the room, jotting notes, reaching into cabinets, peering at Ruby's body without meeting her eyes? Ruby held the pill in the palm of her hand and stared at it, terrified. The question swam through her mind. If she were going to name the baby, what would it be?

Fern, if it was a girl. Finn if it was a boy. Names she

ISSN 1941-3157
Copyright © 2007–2019 Storyscape Journal

   | [elpm](#)

[Donate with PayPal](#)

would never, could never, use again. Secrets in a language that belonged to her and her only.

Now Ruby's husband spends most weeks travelling for work, and she is left to wander through her house alone, the names of the fish like a song since forgotten. Sometimes a dream is only that — imaginary. Some dreams don't wake up.

"Maybe you should volunteer or something," her husband says one night over dinner. The table stretches between them like a long, empty hallway. Her fork clinks as she pushes her food into neat, tiny piles around the rim of her plate. What does he mean? That when he comes home from work he finds her pacing through the house, wearing too-big T-shirts inside out, listless and pale like a haunting. "Something that'll keep you busy, you know?"

She researches adoption clinics for weeks, reading every single review and combing through the requirements and stipulations, the fees and forms and checklists. Then one day, Ruby dresses up and takes a taxi into the city. The clouds pile up in dense towers on the horizon, the promise of afternoon rain. When the taxi pulls up to the clinic, Ruby smooths her hair and her dress, and she wobbles a little as she steps onto the sidewalk in her pumps.

ISSN 1941-3157
Copyright © 2007–2019 Storyscape Journal

   | [elmsj](#)

[Donate with PayPal](#)

The clinic she'd gone to as a teenager was an old, worn-down brick building with yellow fluorescent lighting, the shelves lined with plastic orchids grey with dust. She'd sat in a fraying blue chair for over an hour, tapping her foot against the linoleum and counting her breaths. A fly buzzed against the window, the drone of its wings punctuated by the smack of its body on the glass. First slowly, a dull beating, then sharp jabs quickening in an erratic rhythm. Across the room, by the water fountain, Ruby had watched a child press her hand against the fish tank, following the path of a goldfish with the tip of her finger.

"Don't forget to the feed the fish, Ruby," her father had called up the stairs to her that night as her parents left for dinner. He pulled his wool jacket from the closet while her mother wrapped a scarf around her neck. "And call us if you need anything." She promised she would, but she didn't. She was so afraid.

For several hours Ruby hadn't felt any effect from the pill, and she started to wonder if she'd been wrong, somehow, if she hadn't been pregnant at all. Or if it wasn't working. Then her insides twisted, a stab of pain like a molten thread running through her core. She snuck into her parent's bathroom and poured herself a bath in the deep, porcelain tub. The nurse had said a bath would help with the cramping. She lay her head



on the edge of the tub and closed her eyes, suddenly dizzy and nauseous, lightheaded. When she woke up the water was cold and red with blood.

The adoption agency is clean, and there are brochures on the table in front of her, but Ruby doesn't thumb through any of the materials. Her entry paperwork sits on her lap, still blank. Across the room, a teenage girl fidgets uncomfortably in her seat, her hand draped over the round globe of her belly. There's art on the walls, oil paintings of flowers and birds and stretching blue skies. It feels wrong. When the receptionist calls Ruby's name, she pretends she doesn't hear, pretends she's someone else. The receptionist disappears into the back office, and Ruby stands up and leaves, hurrying down the stairs, her heels clicking against the concrete as she rushes to the street.

Ruby gasps at the cool air as heavy raindrops splash against her skin, dripping down her neck and her face. For a few blocks, she just walks, not knowing where she's going or why. It is only when she passes by the deli her father used to take her to that she realizes she is going to the aquarium, guided as though by some invisible thread. As though this is the reason she's gone downtown to the begin with: to gaze at the deep from beneath it.

ISSN 1941-3157
Copyright © 2007–2019 Storyscale Journal

   | [\[email\]](#)

[Donate with PayPal](#)

She lingers by the jellyfish, her fingers against the glass, and watches them undulate through the invisible currents. *Aurelia aurita* — moon jellies. They float weightless and unworldly on the other side of the thick glass, trailing opaque ribbons through the water. If Ruby squints she can almost see the ghost reflection of the children she doesn't have, faces pressed against the tank. Blurry, as though underwater.

That night Ruby fills her own tub with scalding water and watches the steam curl up over the mirror until her reflection is obscured into a smudge. She slips into the bath, holding her breath and opening her eyes beneath the water, her hair billowing out in soft curtains around her face. Immersed like that, her breath escaping in tiny bubbles that burst to the surface, she thinks of the saltwater fish, the geometry of their scales, the wild colors changing as they moved, fins fluttering like silk scarves through the water. She imagines herself sinking deeper, deeper, deeper, coming to rest in a bed of riotous coral while tiny, curled seahorses bob sideways around her.

ISSN 1941-3157
Copyright © 2007–2019 Storyscape Journal

   | [elpm](#)

[Donate with PayPal](#)

Kelly Grogan received her MFA from Antioch University, Los Angeles. An Elizabeth George Foundation Grant recipient, her fiction and non-fiction have been published in *The Tishman Review*, *The Forge*, *Blue Earth Review*, and *Reed Magazine*, among others. Her work was nominated for Best of the Net 2018, and she will be a writer-in-residence at PLAYA in December 2019.

ISSN 1941-3157
Copyright © 2007–2019 Storyscape Journal

   | info@storyscapejournal.com

[Donate with PayPal](#)