

This Rubbery, Unsure Thing

by Shawn Misener

The sea is transparent rubber, and peering down into it I recognize the shiny fish in suspended animation, their partially exploded bodies obscured by their own blood. The appearance of flecks and trails of color solidified in a newly minted marble. I stand above them and test the buoyancy of the water, and find that it is nothing less than a trampoline, extending to the horizon in all directions.

The ocean is dead. A divine snapshot must have fated the water and its inhabitants to this. A solid jelly that no ship will ever cross and no fisherman will ever drop his lure into. What a cruel fucking twist of events, I think aloud. Above, the clouds continue on their slow roll, muting the sun and releasing it in turn, and I find myself thinking of my children. I can't remember their names, or how many there are, but hot fury wells up from my abdomen when I think of them potentially playing in the waves one moment, then the next frozen in this fucking rubber. Dead eyes open and enthused, locked in place in the act of swimming behind a rambling crab, all fates suddenly equal.

So I bounce. It doesn't matter which direction. At twenty feet into the sky I flatten out and take in the panorama. Schools of tiny fish, now laminated into twisting swirls that again remind me of marbles. The larger residents of this absurdity -the sharks and jellyfish- dotting the field like a scatter plot. I let my body hit the water face down, arms wide. The surface gives and an absurdly wretched sucking fills my ears, and my mouth is instantly pried open by the jelly. I can feel it hardening against my tongue, my eardrums, and even my ass. There won't be any more breathing.

I look down at what amounts to the portrait that I will carry with me into death. The ocean floor is only a few yards down, though I was sure it wasn't visible before. And there they are, my children. All ten of them, sitting cross legged in a circle, their necks tilted back enough that I can see the color of their eyes and the curved frowns of their lips. There is no sound but I can hear them screaming, their violent cries bouncing behind my eyes. I scream back at them, knowing fully what terror is composed of. It's not the fear of death, it IS death. Terror is reserved for those who are dead already, but have yet to succumb. The realization that there is only this last moment before everything is stolen away into the blackness.

I pull back on the stick and lift the plane a bit. A quiet voice through the headset: "Daddy, can we go home now?"

"Yeah."

The ocean still churns under us. I wonder what would happen if I just shut down all the systems and let the Cessna glide gently down into the water. I can see the look on my son's face as the water fills the cabin, the usual confidence he has in my eternal heroism overtaken by panic. Would he realize then that nothing is to be taken for granted?

Setting the trajectories toward the airport I feel the first real thing I've felt in ages. The ebb and flow of being a living, breathing human fucking BEING. The on and off nature of consciousness. I'm taking us home and below the ocean is roiling, yet we are still dead, dead, dead, solidified like ancient bugs in a surreal rubber, our last moments spent admiring the sweeping pattern of hundreds of little fish, frozen in time.

