Goldfish

by angel readman

The fairground looks rickety in the daylight, like fun's getting old and could use an oil. Mom brought me on summer evenings I think, when the sun made the sides of the rides shine, bent by light. A fine rain hits the rivets bulging under the paint, visible rust gathering round the edges of the lips of the paintings of pretty girls above the dodge cars and Evel Kneivel's cape. I'm not sure who he is, just a stars and stripes man above the wall of death ride. Without the night, even the lights have little colour. There's no distraction from bolts and rivets on the cases of the rides, by seeing even one I see the whole thing could come loose and crumple, a tin can around the fizz of laughter turning flat.

There are no queues. The plastic ducks bob as the water's pricked by rain. I wonder if their tank will overflow and they will float away on puddles, a bright yellow gush down the road. Red beaks like sudden smiles on drawn faces inside the cars.

The guy at the stall's on his break. I see him under the awning of the candy floss stand with a cigarette in his hand, looking into the smoulder of it like it's the light of the world. He flicks it on the ground and goes back to his stall to stoop beneath its plastic roof. He's always there, eyes darting like he's waiting for something that isn't amongst his backdrop of playing cards, stuffed toys, plastic dress-up crowns and bulging bags of hanging goldfish like magnifying glasses over nothing. The water in the bags always looks blue under the canopy; the fish more orange than oranges.

The guy stretches out his arm as he rounds up the herd of ducks that only want to bob. He pulls down his sleeves over a heart tattoo, faded from being seen so many times. It's a skinny sort of heart tattoo, an askew heart from where I stand, an arrow from his point of view. In the middle is a name in flowing letters I can never quite make out, it begins with a C, just like mine and Mom's, then wriggles away. I'll be trying to follow what it says when he'll move,

Copyright © 2009 angel readman. All rights reserved.

fold his hand over his arm as he leans and drop another duck into the channel with a splash.

‘Hey beautiful, my favourite customer,' he says, just like yesterday, just like always, as I hand over my coins.

I watch the ducks bob round their circular river. I look at the slight imperfections on their painted eyes and beaks as I align my pole to the hook on top of a head.

The guy lifts the duck from my hook, exhales like he's surprised as he shows me the cross on its base.

‘We have a winner, again. Girl, you're breaking my heart,' he says, running his hand through his greasy hair. ‘What'll it be', he says.

I'm momentarily upset or angry that he doesn't know. The disappointment is an ache in my throat.

‘Let me guess…'he grins, until I see gold.

Because he does knows this, and me. He knows, here, I always win, and when I do there's no cuddly toy to interest me with its one way embrace. He reaches to the goldfish and hands me a bag, meeting my gaze for a second, before it roams out from the stall to more potential chancers and losers. I hold the bag to the light, the water clear now, the fins wavering as if they want to be touched, the bulbous eyes looking back at mine own.

‘How many fish you got now anyways?' he says. I shrug.

Not many of them live past a day. I keep them in jam jars, vases, pans. Wavering orange lights every corner of my room, swims in circles just to keep breathing, growing only as big as the tank given. Some go belly up when released from the bags, get flushed down the toilet. I wonder if they ever reach the ocean. Sometimes I flush live ones, watch the flickering tail disappear like a flame round the water filled bend. I keep trying, winning, de-bagging and flushing. Look into the bowl imagining orange, that tomorrow's fish will be th one that finds its way back.