

For The Non-Poets



a prose chapbook
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fish

It's a pretty miraculous thing, I suppose, making the transition from being a fish to being a human being. The first thing I should do is go about explaining how I made the transition, the second thing, attempting to explain why. It has been so long since I made the decision to change and since I have actually assumed the role of a human that it may be hard to explain.

Before my role in human civilization, I was a beta - otherwise known as a Japanese fighting fish. Although we generally have a beautiful purple-blue hue, most people familiar with different species of fish thought of us as more expensive goldfish. I was kept in a round bowl, about eight inches wide at it's longest point (in human terms, that would be living in quarters about 25 feet at the widest point). It may seem large enough to live, but keep in mind that as humans, you not only have the choice of a larger home, but you are also able to leave your living quarters at any point in time. I did not have that luxury. In fact, what I had was a very small glass apartment, not well kept by my owners (and I at that point was unable to care for it myself). I had a view of the outside world, but it was a distorted view. And I thought I could never experience that world first-hand.

Previous to living anywhere else, before I was purchased, I resided in a very small bowl - no longer than three inches at the widest point. Living in what humans would consider an eight foot square, I had difficulty moving. I even had a hard time breathing. Needless to say from then on I felt I needed more space, I needed to be on my own. No matter what, that was what I needed.

I lived in the said bowl alone. There was one plastic tree in the center of my quarters - some algae grew on it, but that was all I had for plant life in my space. The bottom of my quarters was filled with small rocks and clear marbles. It was uneventful.

Once they put another beta in my quarters with me - wait, I must correct myself. I thought the put another beta there with me. I must explain, but please do not laugh: I only came to learn at a later point, a point after I was a human, that my owner had actually placed my quarters next to a mirror. I thought another fish was there with me, following my every motion, getting angry when I got angry, never leaving me alone, always taking the same moves as I did. I raced back and forth across my quarters, always staring at the "other" fish, always prepared to fight it. But I never did.

Once I was kept in an aquarium for a short period of time. It was a ten-gallon tank, and I was placed in there with other fish of varying species, mostly smaller. I was the only beta there. There were different colored rocks, and there were more plastic plants. And one of the outside walls was colored a bright shade of blue - I later came to discover that it was paper behind the glass wall. Beyond the other fish, there was no substantial difference in my quarters.

But my interactions with the other fish is what made the time there more interesting. I wanted to be alone most of the time - that is the way I felt the most comfortable. I felt the other fish didn't look like me, and I often felt that they were specifically out to hamper me from any happiness. You have to understand that we are by nature very predatorial - we want our space, we want dominance over others, we want others to fear us. It is survival of the fittest when it comes to our lives. Eat or be eaten.

I stayed to myself most of the time in the aquarium; I occasionally made shows of strength to gain respect from the other fish. It made getting food from the top of the tank easier when no one tempted to fight me for the food. It was lonely, I suppose, but I survived - and I did so with better luck than most of the others there.

Then one day it appeared. First closed off to the rest of us by some sort of plastic for a while, then eventually the plastic walls were taken away and it was there. Another beta was suddenly in my space. My space. This was my home, I had proven myself there. I was the only fish of my kind there, and now there was this other fish I would have to prove myself to. Eat or be eaten. I had to make sure - and make sure right away - that this other fish would never be a problem for me.

But the thing was, I knew that the other fish had no right to be there. I didn't know how they got there, what those plastic walls were, or why they were there. But I had to stop them. This fish was suddenly my worst enemy.

It didn't take long before we fought. It was a difficult battle, all of the other fish got out of the way, and we darted from one end of the aquarium to the other. It wasn't long until I was given the opportunity to strike. I killed the other beta, its blood flowing into my air. Everyone there was breathing the blood of my victory.

Almost immediately I was removed from the aquarium and placed in my other dwelling - the bowl. From then on I knew there had to be a way to get out of those quarters, no matter what I had to do.

I looked around at the owner; I saw them walking around the tank. I knew that they did not breathe water, and this confused me, but I learned

that the first thing I had to do was learn to breathe what they did.

It didn't take much time before I was constantly trying to lift my head up out of the bowl for as long as I could. I would manage to stay there usually because I was holding my breath. But then, one time, I went up to the top in the morning, the way I usually did, and without even thinking about it, I just started to breathe. I was able to keep my full head up out of the water for as long as I wanted and listen to what was going on outside my living quarters.

Everything sounded so different. There were so many sharp noises. They hurt me to listen to them. Looking back, I now understand that the water in my tank muffled any outside noises. But beyond that, no one in my living quarters made noise - no one bumped into things, no one screamed or made noises. But at the time, all these noises were extremely loud.

I then knew I had to keep my head above water as much as possible and try to make sense of the sounds I continually heard. I came to discover what humans refer to as language only through listening to the repeated use of these loud sounds.

When I learned I had to breathe, I did. When I understood that I had to figure out their language, I did. It took so long, but I began to understand what they said. Then I had to learn to speak. I tried to practice under the water, in my dwelling, but it was so hard to hear in my quarters that I never knew if I was doing it correctly. Furthermore, I had become so accustomed to breathing air instead of water that I began to have difficulty breathing in my old home. This filled me with an intense fear. If I continue on with this experiment, I thought, will my own home become uninhabitable to me? Will I die here because I learned too much?

I decided that I had no choice and that I had to ask my owner for help. I had to hope that my ability to produce sounds - and the correct ones, at that - would be enough to let them know that I am in trouble. Furthermore, I had to hope that my owner would actually want to help me. Maybe they wouldn't want me invading their space. Eat or be eaten.

But I had to take the chance. One morning, before I received my daily food, I pulled the upper half of my body from the tank. My owner wasn't coming yet, so I went back down and jumped up again. Still nothing. I kept jumping, until I jumped out of the tank completely. I landed on the table, fell to the floor, coughing. I screamed.

The next thing I remember (and you have to forgive me, because my memory is weak here, and this was seven years ago) is being in a hospital. I didn't know what it was then, of course, and it frightened me. Doctors kept me in place and began to study me. They sent me to schools. And to this day

I am still learning.

I have discovered one thing about humans during my life as one. With all the new space I have available to me, with all of the other opportunities I have, I see that people still fight each other for their space. They kill. They steal. They do not breathe in the blood, but it is all around them. And I still find myself doing it as well, fighting others to stay alive.

some people want to believe

so we were sitting there at
denny's in some suburb of
detroit, i don't know which
suburb it was, but we were
there at like ten in the morning
eastern standard time, i was
grabbing a bite to eat before
i crossed the ambassador bridge
and travelled into canada. you
know, i really only associate
places like denny's with
travelling now, i always
stop at some place like denny's
only when taking a road trip
and just stopping for some
food. i think if i went into a
denny's and i wasn't travelling,
i'd get really confused. well,
anyway, like i said, we were at
denny's, and it was morning, so
the both of us got breakfast.
being a vegetarian, i ordered
eggs with hash browns and toast,
right? and the waitress says
to me, like they always do in
some no-name town in the middle
of america, "yuh don't want any
MEAT?", like it's so unheard of
to not eat meat at breakfast.
so i say, no, no meat, thank you,
and then my friend orders pretty
much the same thing, and we
sit for a while, and talk and
stuff, and then the food comes.
so then she asks me, "you're a
vegetarian, right?" and i say,
yes, and then she goes, "but

you're eating chicken."
and i'm just like, well, no, i'm
not, an egg is an animal by-product,
not animal flesh, and i was about
to say that that was the difference
between being a vegetarian and
being a vegan, and she says,
"but if a chicken sat on it long
enough, it would become
a chicken."

and i'm just like, well, no, it's
an unfertilized egg, there was
never a rooster around that hen,
so it could never become a chicken.
and she's like, well, it's a
chicken, though,
and she just couldn't think
that this wasn't a chicken. and
i'm just thinking, my god, does
she really think that a chicken can
lay eggs without them being
fertilized? like only worms and
stuff can procreate
without two sexes present. so
our voices start getting a little
louder, and then it ends up where
i'm saying "so are you having an
abortion every time you have a
menstrual cycle? are men who
have wet dreams mass murderers?"
and she's looking away and saying
"i'm not listening to you -"

and then i realized that some
people, with logic thrown in their
face, will still believe what
they want to believe.

The background of the entire page is a grayscale photograph of classical columns, likely from a Greek or Roman temple. The columns are fluted and have papyrus capitals. They are arranged in a row, receding into the distance, creating a sense of depth and architectural grandeur. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the stone and the fluting of the columns.

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