





The Sea Bream

Caroline Ashley

Good fishing today.

The flick of a rod, swishing through the air. The line unravelling, a silver thread against the sunlight, slipping under the waves. Her father was the guardian of the shore, standing tall, as the waves crashed down on the sand like stallions slamming their hooves upon the earth.

The air smelled of salt, seaweed and sulphur, baking in the summer heat. She raised her head to the breeze, hair whipping against her face.

In her dreams, the world beneath the waves was a kaleidoscope of colour, a land of freedom without boundary, where fish and mermaids and selkies danced among tendrils of kelp and sea grass. Bubbles circled their bodies like pearls, pockets of air that rose to burst on the rolling surface.

She imagined she was a lost princess, cursed to live on land, who longed to explore the ocean's hidden secrets. Her castle rose above the rocks to her right: a white cottage with a rounded tower. To the left, a pier stretched out from the beach, home to the ghosts of families past, their memories imprinted on stone. Her home was the sandy beach, grains embedded in her toes.

The fishing line pulled taut. The rod strained and curved as the fish fought to escape its hook. Her father spun the reel – *release a little,*

then wind back in – slowly tiring his opponent. As the line grew shorter, a fin flashed silver against the waves. Release, then wind. Release, then wind. The fish rose from the water, body flailing, tail whipping back and forth.

What a beauty!

It flapped its fins, scales shining like a rainbow in the light. Her father held the fish aloft and she brushed a finger across its body, smooth and silken. A round eye spun in its socket, searching for the familiar spray of salt, bereft without the pull of the tide. It was trapped on land like she was, the ocean just out of reach.

He's a big one, Dad said. Bigger than I've ever seen. Rare to find them here.

Fishing was her father's joy. His lure drawing the shining creatures to the shore, connecting land and sea. He would release them back within moments, a brief greeting before they parted ways once more. But not for this fine specimen of the waves.

He took his prize to the Fish Pond, an aquarium hidden among the rocks, nestled next to the white cottage, where stone walls stood against the waves. His eyes lit with pride and grin held wide, he weighed his catch on their scales and posed for a photo, its body held against his chest.

A man clapped her father on the shoulder, then carried his prize away in a plastic bucket, its body slicing through the water. The Fish Pond was its home now: it would join the mullet, tarbot and pollock, kept safe and fed, to be admired by those who visited the bay.

Was it sad to lose its freedom? Did it wish it could leap the wall and return to its realm? A brave princess of the sea would rescue it, take the bucket and bound across the rocks, throw it back into the water. But she was just a girl, following in her father's wake.

He raised her on his shoulders and they walked back to the beach, the sun warm on their skin. She leaned her head on his, the smell of salt in his hair.

They ate together, watching the waves roll into the shore. How many of the fish's brethren swam under the waves, just out of reach, still free to dance in open waters? Her father dreamed of meeting them all, luring them into his grasp.

After lunch, he returned to his position at the boundary between land and sea, head held high, pride in his earlier catch still lighting his face. With the flick of a rod, swishing through the air, his search began again.

As the sun meandered across the sky, she left the shore and ventured onto the pier. His distant figure was silhouetted against the light, standing sentinel before the waves. The moment was imprinted on the air itself, held frozen in her memory. He looked towards the pier and waved; she raised her hand in return.

(IN THE AFTERGLOW)

Rick K. Reut

...also known as the sun.
This day is married to
that night. Does anyone
think that it isn't true?
Some words seem not to mean
anything. Others – even
less. You look at their lean
letters while the evening
skies are starting to grow
dark as the easiest thing
to sow in the afterglow
of the day's wedding ring...

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wedding ring...



Fly

Sophia Zengierski

You could taste the sky.
It was full of her dreams—
—her mothers', her daughters'.
There was a moment—several—
when we pushed up on the air
with our palms together.
In the clearest day, that white noon light
I watched you stumble and flutter:
a flight here or there, up and down.
The engines roared; the lights shone
with anger on the way
back from the grocery store.
Across the bridge, she made a phone call.
And another.
And another.
No one came. No one could come.
But she looks for you still—
your little wings outstretched
until they are halo'd in the sun.
Because you are everything she feels
right now.
And one day,
you will be whole again.
One day,
you will
fly.

Starlight

Michael Pollentine

starlight
car horns
mimic
snippets
of kisses
wet
like concrete
fleeting
trains rumbling
wild
towards
distant
exuberant dawn
dancing
the tips
of shadow
waiting
for a crystal sunrise
I yawn



Little Sparks of Love

M. S. Marquart

71 days since I saw a friend in person
Disability is lonely
No energy to go out, to travel for a visit
no energy for phone calls, video calls
no energy to text

Lying in bed
wondering if I will fade away
ruminating on my uselessness as the world suffers
pondering whether life is worth it
I check my phone
and find
a little spark
of love

A friend has reached out
“I’m thinking of you”
“I miss you”
“I’m sending care”
“I’m recalling that time”
“No need to reply”

These flickers of connection
are shimmering blessings
shining kindnesses
that say you matter,
stay

Powerful protection
against despair
isolation
fear

My heart swells
with gratitude, burning away the false demons of isolation;
with the warm glow of being remembered, like CPR to reignite my union
with humanity;
with a glint of community, reviving my belief that we are all irreplaceable
treasures;
with a glimmer of hope, rising from my chest into the stars





The Gooner

airport, age 32

The gooner

He unplugged his internet

yes

YES

The gooner has finished



Two Suns

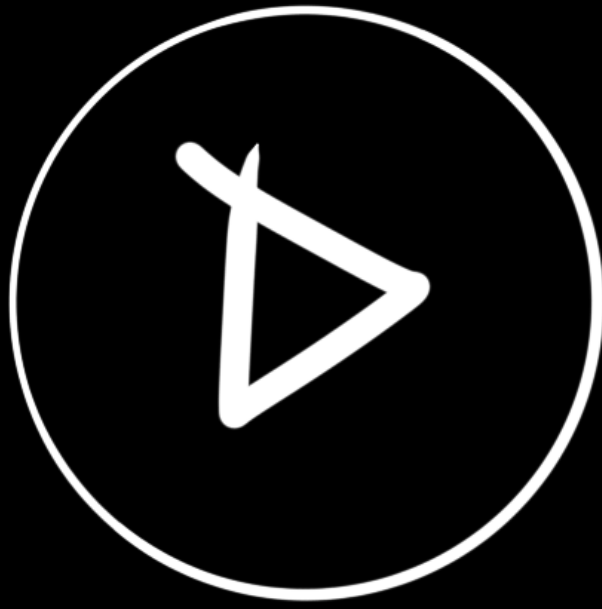
Kushal Poddar

Two suns rise with their
notions of resplendence.
Both lacks caffeine, if you
know what I mean.

We fell asleep by the pond.

The sun on the water swims
near us, and the one in the sky
blankets our flesh.
Most of the days we don't feel
our skin. During the Summer
we are nothing but a bundle of it.

"Wake up." I whisper. My shadow
won't stir. I try so we may
saunter back to God, but it stays
where I do, supine on this earth,
amidst the green, green grass.



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“(IN THE AFTERGLOW)” by Rick K. Reut

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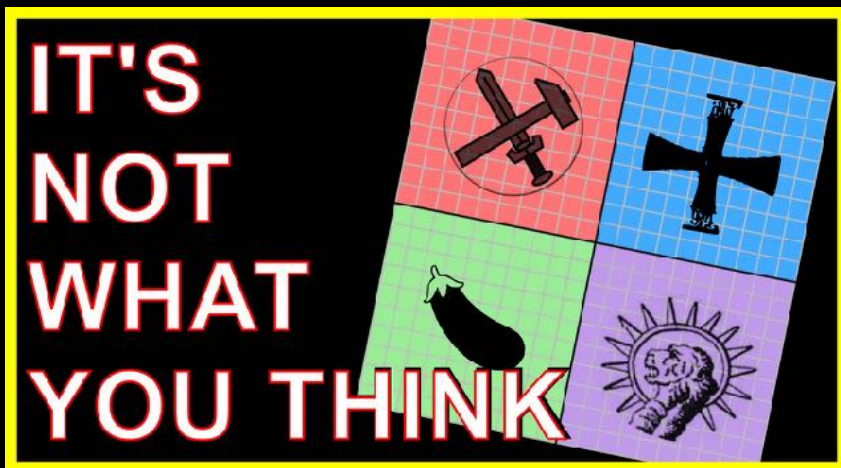
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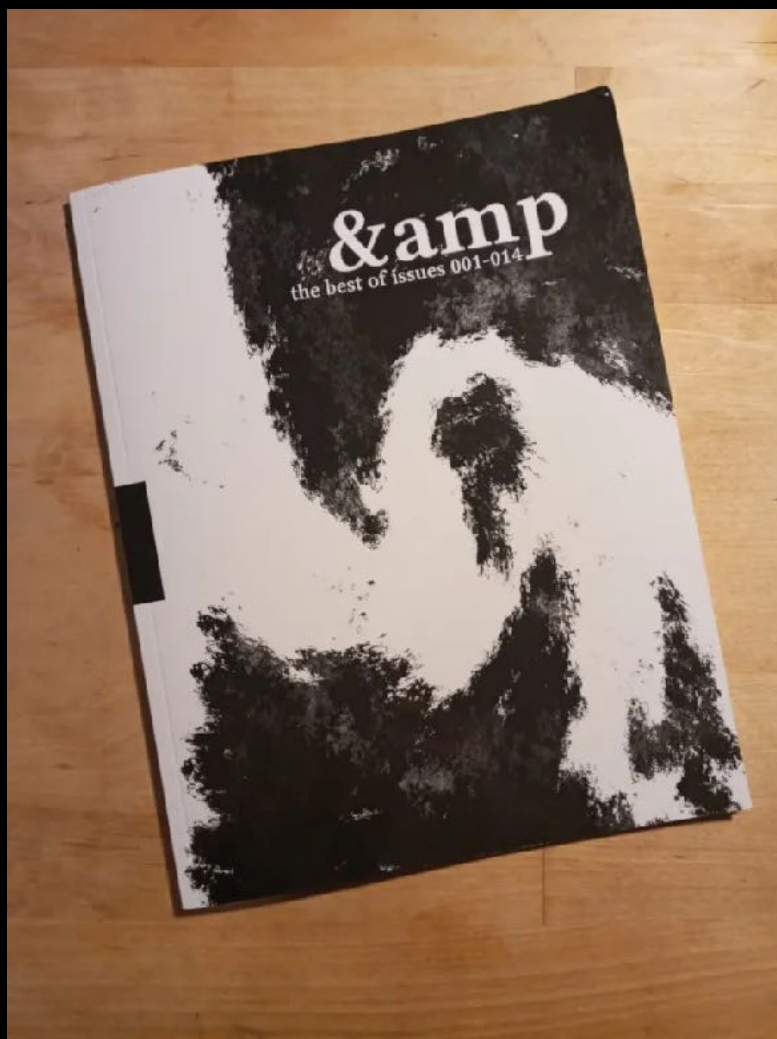
YouTube interface showing a video player for "Remembering the Dead w/ Lewis Woolston" by Book Club from Hell. The video thumbnail shows a man pointing at a book cover titled "REMEMBERING THE DEAD AND OTHER STORIES" by LE WOODSTON. The video player includes a play button, progress bar, and volume controls. Below the video, the channel name "Book Club from Hell" is displayed with 1.17K subscribers and a "Subscribed" button. There are also like, comment, share, and download icons. A notification bell icon is visible. The video title "Remembering the Dead w/ Lewis Woolston" is shown above the channel name. The video player also shows a timestamp of 0:00 / 1:21:41 and various playback controls.

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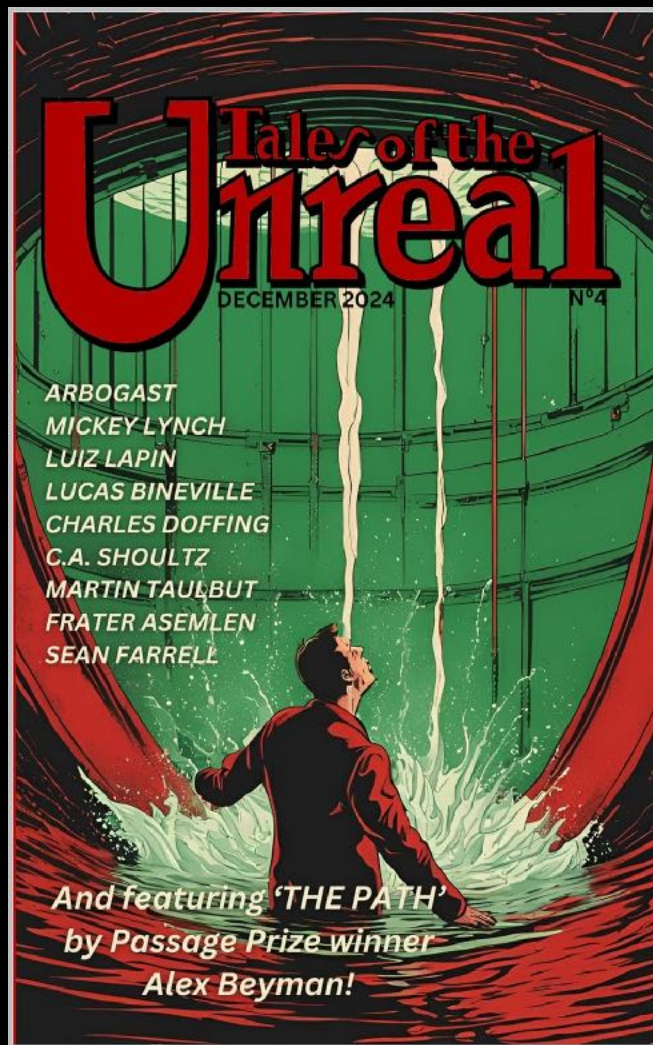
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