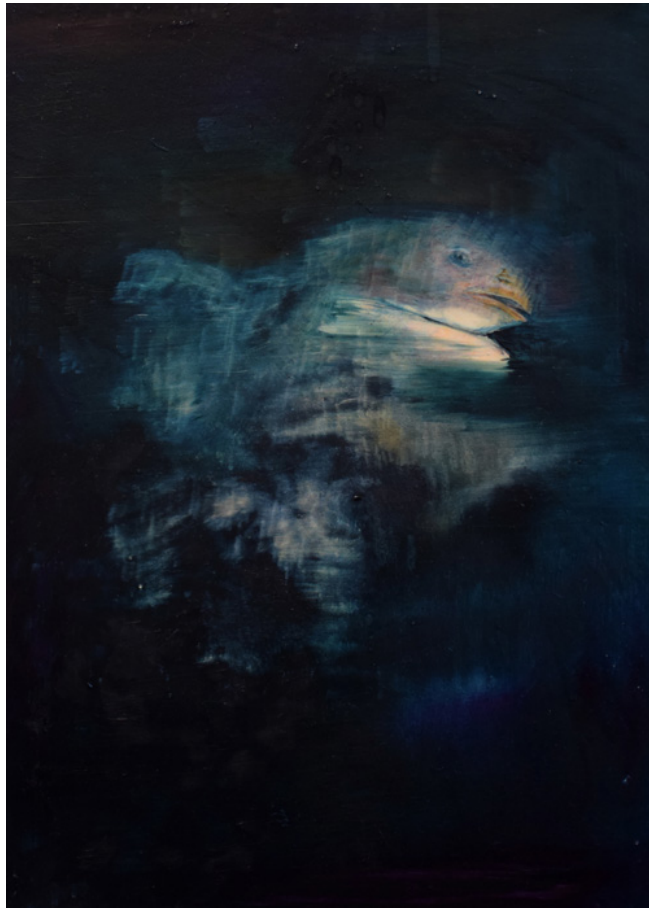


FLASH FICTION

Passing Through

by George Nevgodovskyy



"Surfacings" by Linnea Ryshke

The sun peeks out over the western hills just as we drive into Chinook Head. The kids asleep in the backseat with crumbs sticking to their cheeks, Sarah restlessly sifting through the local stations. Heading for the coast. Just passing through.

It's quiet in the Kootenays. The city shimmers and Sarah looks out the window, down unfamiliar streets. I do my best to look like I'm not looking for you. A glimpse of a past life. Suddenly the old feeling is back. Our first kiss. Songs from bands that have long since broken up. Your cerulean blue dress and your fish-tailed hair. We're naked in a moonlit stairwell. My body is a raging sea and yours is a cliffside.

You always told me you hated it here, and I felt irrationally betrayed when I heard you had moved back. Fishing boats swaying soundlessly in the night. Cold beer and wine and gas stations with the windows boarded up. Rusty refrigerators left on the side of the road.

When your dad was nine years old, you told me he watched your grandfather drown in the lake just on the outskirts of town. They were night fishing. He fell out of the boat and got tangled in the net. Your father wasn't strong enough to row back to shore, so he had to swim and spent the night on the beach, nearly freezing to death in his wet clothes until they found him. Some nights in bed, you'd wake up thrashing under the bedcovers like it was you tangled below the surface. I'd hold you close and wouldn't let go until you drifted back to sleep.

You said you never wanted a family. Not after we lost —

When I think of — I think of my 8th grade English teacher. "You must give your poems a title," she'd tell us, "Just like you must give your children a name."

But you and I, we were glad we hadn't gotten that far.

I reach for Sarah's hand but she doesn't reach back, as if she knows what it is I'm really reaching for. And now it's as though Sarah, the kids, no one else exists. Just me and — and the absence of you. The lacunae. Empty spaces on the page.

There's a dive bar up ahead and I picture you inside still pretending to like beer, watching your husband watch the Rockets game while your mom has the kids and it's easy and you convince yourself you want this because it's too late to want anything else.

Every day the chasm widens, until everything falls in. Nothing escapes.

Sarah turns the radio down and now it's only the road and the hum of the engine. The last of the light passes through and now the sun is gone. The hills are dark. In a few hours, we'll be by the sea and you'll still be here.

But then the feeling passes too, and now it's just Sarah and I and it's the kids snoring in the backseat and we both catch each other smiling. I want to tell her, tell her about — but in that moment she reaches for my hand and I grab on like it's a lifeline.

Now a fog is settling below the hills just as we drive out of Chinook Head, and when I look back in the rear view mirror the town is gone and so are you. No one else exists but Sarah and Mikayla and Lacey and as we're engulfed by the fog I picture the sea, heavy and blue, overwhelming me.

Someone's yelling from the beach; I hear it from beneath the waves. The salt burns in my eyes as I swim towards the surface, towards the voice, but my hands are numb and my muscles ache and my lungs are on fire. I swim harder. I push through the sea and I reach for the sky but it only gets further away.

Then the voice is gone. Maybe it wasn't ever there in the first place. I'm tired and cold and edging on delirium and I let the sea consume me. I know I don't stand a chance. I picture my bloated corpse, tangled in seagrass and coated in salt, washing up like driftwood.

And as my body begins to go limp, sinking down towards the abyss, I admit to myself what I've known all along. It was your voice I heard coming from the beach.

Your voice my hands were reaching for.