**The Last Time We Fought**

Patrick Malka

The last time we fought, Sophie took me to see a beached whale.

That’s what she did to stop an argument. Distract me just long enough that I wouldn’t have the strength to start up again. Or realize it wasn’t worth the effort. It wasn’t a secret. I knew what she was doing, and I always followed.

We argued more than I care to admit and as such, Sophie was a repository of strange sightings. It was a habit she developed growing up, a competitive game with friends who have all since moved away. I never asked if she still catalogued out of habit or in anticipation of their newfound purpose.

She once interrupted an argument by sneaking us into a neighbour’s yard where a fairy ring had sprung up. A perfect circle of mushrooms embedded in the lawn, said to be the result of fairies dancing, or portals opened by witches. A natural structure so perfect the simplest option was to assign it a supernatural origin. Sophie pulled my ear to her mouth and said, “Can we just make something up to explain this and go home please?”

On another occasion, after a disagreement over what I perceived to be some not-so-subtle slight from her father, she dragged me to the community garden where someone had devoted considerable time and effort growing squashes with particular shapes by putting them in boxes or cinching them with belts. One squash was made to look like an insect, head, abdomen, and thorax, protruding sticks for legs and antennae. Sophie pointed to it and said, “We have control over this.”

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This time she brought me to the water to see this enormous creature that had landed its weight on the rocky shore. Sophie never took her eyes off its imposing form, even as she began to openly sob.

I couldn’t take my eyes off it either.

I had never seen one so close, though yellow tape secured a perimeter around it. At that moment I felt just as crushed as that poor behemoth probably did before it died. I was tired and I knew Sophie felt the same. Sophie didn’t say a word before turning and walking away. She didn’t need to.

I stayed behind until darkness made the whale invisible against the sky and water. When I finally began the walk back, I took my time. I could not face what was waiting for me at home. Another argument? Another attempt at an oddity? Maybe just the end.

The song of that whale followed me the first few blocks away from the waterfront, until I realized I was actually hearing the characteristic clicks and whistles, probably another whale offshore, eulogizing its lost friend. As though I could feel any worse, that did it.

The further I got, the clearer the song became. No one was around to exchange a knowing glance, a social confirmation that I was not dragging some illusion back from shore. Even though there wasn’t a single pedestrian or car on the street, I could feel a creeping presence at my back, like being followed by a perfectly silent truck. I wished Sophie was with me. I wished she would turn to me and deliver the perfect one liner that would allow us to feel silly, return home and start fresh for the hundredth time. To leave the cleaning of the splintered door frame and broken mug until tomorrow, when those clues that something different, something worse had happened, were distant enough to feel like they belonged to someone else.

An explosive sound from my right made me trip off the sidewalk, falling headlong into the street. If there had been any traffic at all, I could have easily been run over. I stayed down, only turning my head, searching for the source of the sound, but there was nothing. The nearby homes were dark, the parked cars empty and void of movement. The sound came from right beside me, but it couldn’t have. It was the sound of a whale projecting air from its blowhole. I was too far from the water to have heard that sound, let alone loud enough to knock me off my feet.

That’s when I started running, cutting across a nearby open field in hopes of making it home faster. The field had a small but dense island of trees in the middle of it. At this time of night, it was complete darkness in there but even so, as I ran around its periphery, I could detect an enormous swatch of blackness flowing gracefully within it, breaching the tops of the trees where I could not see. I ran even faster.

I could not shake the feeling of being followed. I ran up the stairs to our apartment where I was greeted by silence and more darkness. I could see Sophie’s outline at the window, no visible reaction to me bursting into the apartment. I joined her. We stood, side by side, staring down at the street below, where a humpback whale spread its amorphous shape across most of the block, its presence on our street impossible and yet, we were both staring at the same thing.

“It followed us home,” I said.

“No,” Sophie said, stepping away from the window, away from me. “It followed you.”