

ROY KESEY

HOW IT HAPPENS THAT OUR SENSES DO NOT PERCEIVE CERTAIN BODIES

MY GIRLFRIEND'S PARENTS were members of Regatas, the biggest health club in Lima, so that's where Fiorella and I spent most of each summer. We diddled around the pool with overpriced drinks and breaded calamari; some tennis if we felt vigorous, some ping-pong if we didn't. It was fine.

Then Regatas went out of fashion, so we shifted to the beaches south of the city. They were fine too. The food that got ferried down from the stands was dodgy-looking but tasty: my favorite was the mussels marinated in peppers and tomatoes and parsley and onions and way, way too much lemon juice. The only problem was that for shade there was nothing but spindly little umbrellas of palm fronds and bamboo, and even after six years in Peru the summer sun could send me from beige to scarlet in half an hour.

There were small dusty towns alongside nearly every beach. I had no idea what the people there did during the other nine months of the year – a little fishing, I imagined, or maybe they built some of the cheap wooden furniture that you see in all the markets – but during the summer they sold sandwiches and Cokes and ice cream to the rich people.

While the parents worked, the kids came down to fool around on the beach. Unfortunately, in Peru it's pretty much only the wealthy who can afford swimming lessons, and the ocean here is no place to learn on your own. Not that that kept folks from trying. Hardly a week went by with-

out a newspaper article lamenting another drowning. Maybe half of the bodies were retrieved at some point, gray and swollen and missing fingers or toes, their eyes pecked out if they'd floated face-up for any length of time. The other half never got pulled out at all.

ONE DAY FIORELLA TOOK ME TO A PLACE called Punta Rocas about an hour south of the city. The beach was crowded but hardly anyone was in the water — the waves were too big and chaotic, and the rip-tide flag was out. We dumped our stuff under one of the bamboo umbrellas, and I ordered a couple of beers. Fiorella stretched out on her towel with the crossword, and I put on my sunglasses to keep her from asking me which other women I was staring at.

By late afternoon I was a more than a little sunburned and a few beers past my limit. Fiorella asked me for the third time if I knew Descartes' first name, and when I told her again that I didn't, she set down the crossword and went to sleep. Just then a young boy in a blue t-shirt about four sizes too big walked by, stopping every so often to pick up the dirty seagull feathers that were scattered along the edge of the water. I wondered if he was gathering them to make some kind of souvenir to sell, or for his collection of dirty bird feathers, or just to pass the time.

He was a cute kid, buzz-cut black hair, smile like a flashlight. Right in front of me he got distracted by a line of foam left by the last big wave. He kicked at it over and over, watching the weightless bits rise on the light breeze, curl and tuck and dip back down to the sand.

Up higher on the beach there was a German Shepherd loose; it started barking, and the kid looked up and caught my eye. We both smiled. For a second it was like we were two figures in a painting, me in the shade and him in the sun, an eight-year-old kid and a thirty-year-old man with nothing much in common except the time and the place and the dumb smiles on our faces.

Finally he turned away and wandered farther up the beach. Which is when something clicked into place — I swear to you, it was audible — and I dug into my knapsack, pulled out a magazine, and ransacked Fiorella's purse for a pen.

What had happened was this: I was overwhelmed by the thought that everything around me was somehow essential. My hands started to tremble as I realized that for everything I caught I would miss something else, and that unless I got it down immediately I would lose it all. I had never felt anything like that before, and had no idea where the feeling came from. Now I know.