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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.

I dumped everything straight into the margins of that magazine: the kid, the feathers, Fiorella oiled bright in the sun. I got distracted every thirty seconds or so—the waiter, the ice cream vendors, the dog—but then even those distractions began to find their places. It was as if the interruptions were so constant and pure that they stopped interfering and became part of what I had to get down.

There was something big behind all this, and the longer I wrote the nearer I came to it. I circled it slowly, waves and bodies and sky, but the thing itself stayed hidden. At last I looked up, hoping to catch the detail that would point me straight to it, and I saw that same boy coming back down the beach, the front of his shirt now bulging with dirty feathers.

As I stared at him, everything else—the details and distractions, the elusive thing itself—slipped away. I felt a surge of anger, as if it were the boy's fault that I'd failed, but a second later I realized how ridiculous that was. I tossed the pen and the magazine aside, called up to the waiter for another beer, and when the kid waved at me I waved back.

Out of nowhere a feather drifted down and settled at his feet. I still wonder sometimes where the feather came from—if there had been a bird anywhere overhead at that moment, I feel sure I would have seen it. The kid hadn't noticed the feather as it fell, and if he didn't get to it in a hurry the water was going to take it away. I pointed, and when he saw it he pounced.

Then two big waves A-framed behind him and beat him down. I waited for him to surface, thinking he'd stroke out of it, gasping and grinning, shaking his head. But he never popped up. I waited for somebody to cry out, his mother or uncle or cousin or whoever. No one did. There was nothing but the rush of new waves and the barking of that damned dog.

I pulled off my sunglasses, peeled off my shirt and ran down to the edge. The only sign of the kid now was a trail of dirty feathers leading out across the water. I threw myself into the surf and the rip took hold of me, pulled me farther and farther out.

When I was about where the trail of feathers ended, I took a last look across the surface and then dove, but the water was all sanded up. I fought back up to the top, got smacked in the face by a wave, took just enough air in, and dove again.

My next few tries were more of the same, the saltwater burning my eyes, my arms growing weaker, each dive a little shorter than the one before. Finally I found him. He was floating five or six feet deep, the t-shirt

twisted tight around his chest. His mouth was open and so were his eyes, but he wasn't trying to swim. I grabbed the collar of his shirt and dragged him to the surface.

We were maybe a hundred yards out at that point, and I swam as hard as I could, holding the kid with one arm. The shore kept getting farther away. I tried heading sideways to beat the rip, but the boy was dead weight and my legs were almost gone.

I thought that maybe on my own I'd have a shot at making it back; I let go of the kid and took a few strokes, but I could hardly get my arms out of the water. I rolled onto my back and tried to rest, but waves kept washing over me, filling my nose and mouth. Then something brushed against my leg, and I thrashed and turned. It was the body of the boy. I stared at him, his open eyes. I grabbed hold of him and pulled him in tight.

There was still the chance a fishing boat might pass by, or Fiorella might wake up, catch sight of us and send a lifeboat or something. I took the deepest, slowest breaths I could, and kept the kid's mouth just barely out of the water, my arm locked under his jaw. I kicked again, and again, and again, and again.

I have no idea how long we floated there — it could have been two minutes or twenty. The sky was bright and beautiful and empty above us. Then I had no strength left, and we sank; when the cold hit my face I kicked one more time, but we didn't quite clear the surface, and water was all I took in.

It took a long time to reach the bottom, a lot longer than I would have thought. At first I fought against it, pawing upward with my one free arm as the dark closed down on me. The pressure started to build in my chest, and it grew and grew until the world was reduced to pain, and dark, and fear.

But there's a reason why some drowning victims have a smile on their face when they get pulled out. At the very end the pressure relents, and the pain fades, and you are falling, but slowly, and there is pleasure, or something like it. Once you've lost that last desperate fight to stay near what you know, there is a sort of peace at gliding down through something so much like yourself: we are all mostly water, after all.

At last the darkness becomes absolute, and the silence, and you are nothing inside of it.

I DON'T KNOW WHEN THE VOICES STARTED. They were indistinct at first, scattered sounds like leaves in the air. Then the sounds resolved into words. There was never more than one voice speaking at a time, and the rhythms varied, now calm and slow, now frantic and fast.

There was a sense that I still had the kid held tight. At times it seemed like the voices were speaking to us, and at times like they were talking about us; most of them spoke Spanish, but there was English too, and French, and languages I didn't recognize. It took me a while, but finally I figured out where we were.

And here we've been ever since. Slowly your flesh gets eaten away by crabs and bottom-feeders, but it doesn't hurt. Nothing hurts. There is no light, no weight, no temperature. After a time I felt a sudden give, a release, and something floated up away from me: my body, rising back toward the surface.

There are thousands of us here. The kid's body is gone now as well, but he has stayed with me. His name is Gonzalo, and it turns out he was collecting those feathers for no reason at all: at the end of each day he just dumped them back into the water so they'd be there for him to find again the next morning.

We get three or four newcomers every year. They're sometimes a little nervous at first, worried about how those up top will make do without them; most of them are poor, fishermen and what have you, but every so often we get a clubber or a tourist. No special privileges, but no undue ribbing either. There's only one rule: if you've got a story to tell, everyone else goes quiet.

That's what it comes to down here; stories are the only thing we have. Not all of the bodies rise back up to the top, but I've been told that of those that stay, trapped in kelp or wedged beneath rocks, even their bones only last so long. Once the muscle and cartilage and tendons are gone, nibbled or rotted away, the bones scatter and settle, and over time they turn to stone.

And so we tell stories. We start with ones from the lives we've lived; the newcomers are always tempted to lie, and often do, making themselves out to be better or worse than they really were. We forgive them because they're still learning, and we've all been there ourselves: the way I told things at first, Fiorella and I were both in the running for Nobels.

Once they start feeling more comfortable down here, their histories come out. And when those are done, it's on to the stories we make up, the ones we design from bits and pieces of everything we've ever seen or heard. There is a certain strength to be had from each anecdote fixed with meaning and worth. We give endings to the lives of those we knew up top; we give color and form to all the lives we could have lived ourselves.

I still think about Fiorella sometimes. I've always known she wouldn't have trouble making do; I imagine she married well, and even if not I'm sure she has her choice of clubs and beaches. Soon enough, of course, none of that will matter. The one thing I hope is that on the day she lost me, she found the magazine I'd written in, and saw the jottings in the margins, and understood what they were for.

See, I wish I could say that there is nothing but life and then stories — that there is no reason for anyone to be afraid — but there's something I haven't told you. Of the thousands of voices, there are always a few that you come to trust, that you come to love, voices that tell you what is true. Sooner or later, though, those voices run out of stories and fall silent. Of course you call to them, over and over you call. There's never any answer, and this is death: the silence.