

MINNOW

When my doctor says the fetus is just a tiny sliver, a little minnow inside of me, I imagine myself a lake. It is a daunting task, keeping my minnow afloat, a full-time job. I no longer bother to revise my dissertation. Now I only pretend.

It is a task to sit through the weekly three hour dissertation workshop. As others compare methodology sections and scholarly overviews, I excuse myself to the restroom, feeling only the needs of my bladder. When the seminar ends, I walk towards home down Walnut Street, stopping at the used bookstore on 40th, just to visit the cats.

Previously, the bookstore had been the *Philly Diner* and Tim and I used to go in for cheesesteaks. Now that he has moved in, we never go anywhere together, and I come alone. If I browse long enough, one or both of the two neutered toms—heavy and fat with low-hanging bellies—will find me. Before we discovered Tim’s allergy, I’d had a platinum Burmese named Ash. This moment of feline infidelity—when the cats come to me, a stranger, and rub against my calves and shins—is the one I crave. Their warm fat bodies fill me with hope. As I kneel to pet them, I feel the minnow within me coming to life.

At home, Tim and I watch the latest news on the Philadelphia “serial cat killer.” Four dead cats are found in Kensington, beaten to death, their bodies too tortured for viewers to see. Although it is not morning, bile rises to my throat and I can’t keep it in. I throw up in the space between the TV and my feet, with Tim on the couch beside me. This is not the first time, but it is not until now that Tim puts two and two together and understands what it has all been about.

He returns with paper towels, disinfectant spray, a sponge, and a plastic bucket of soapy water. He hands me a damp paper towel to wipe my mouth. He pulls on yellow plastic gloves and kneels to clean my mess. Scrubbing, he looks at me, eyes accusing. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Because it’s mine, I think to say, knowing that my body has just become ours. No longer my own little minnow swimming inside the lake that is me. Now there is a rowboat on my lake, an oar cutting through, a fisherman trying to catch my elusive, slippery, silvery minnow.

I refuse the paper towel, wiping my mouth instead with the back of my hand. “Let me,” I say, taking the bucket and sponge from him. “I’ll do it.” Kneeling beside him, I strip him of his gloves, wanting to clean the mess myself, wanting to finish this task first, before rinsing my mouth and brushing my teeth, knowing that after the mess I have made of things, it will be the last decision I’ll be allowed to make alone. 🎸

