At the Aquarium

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QUEENSLAND LUNGFISH—ARRIVED AT THE COODER AQUARIUM IN 1933; THE OLDEST AND LARGEST KNOWN LUNGFISH IN CAPTIVITY. PLEASE DO NOT TAP ON GLASS.

Another plaque talks about the other fish in with him: tiny thumb-sized orange and yellow Sizzlefish and a pair of roundish, slender fish like blue raviolis flitting in and out of the rocks. But we don’t notice them, seeing only the lungfish, his heavy eyes, the occasional bubbles lifting away from his mossy nostrils.

Today there is only one witness to the proceeding. She has lowered a long-stemmed white rose down into the tank. The lungfish has made his way over and, positioning his tremulous lips beneath the undulating petals, speaks thus:

“My name is Richard. I was born in 1921 just outside Cleveland, Ohio in a lake called Erie. My fellow fishes are of the Dipnoi Order (or Dipneusti) having lungs as well as gills and capable of constructing for themselves mucus-lined mudsleaves in which to withstand extended droughts.”

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(He pauses for a moment.)

"Feedbag is one of my favorite words."

(Brief pause.)

"Do you believe in Justice?  
Or are you like me, seeing life as a series  
of insults and letdowns?  
These are troubled times, people.  
I was one of a dozen lungfish pulled from their mudsleaves.  
I had seen platters of stuffed mushroom caps  
and chicken wellington...once I watched a woman soak her  
finger  
in a jar of capers. There were cider stands  
along the country roads and little Jerry Khan  
took fresh eggs around in his bike basket.  
This was all before I arrived at the aquarium.  
It used to be you had the Good and the Evil.  
People had convictions.  
The Usage Panel was in the process of ruling  
out their beliefs about empiricism, nobody knowing where  
they were headed, and so naturally  
we see a trend toward cultism and fantasy."

(Bubbles.)

"Within the Dipnoi Order  
the hagfish is admired feverishly by the youth  
for its jawless, sucking mouth  
and rasping teeth with which they bore into  
and feed on other fish.  
And like roosters with our balls shaved off  
we move in confusion across the proverbial barnyard,
forgetting about the questions.”

(A long pause.)

“Today I am 74 years old. As for all the unanswered questions only two remain:
What is probably the fiercest of the Asiatic beasts of prey?
and
How fast does the wind go?
I am not sorry I came here, these thoughts sifting down to me
the way a few leaves fall from a tree in autumn.”

(The lungfish retreats.)

The one witness to this, the waitress from a nearby diner on her break, puts her fingers to the glass and gargles.