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At the Aquarium

Mike Craig

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Mike Craig

At the Aquarium

QUEENSLAND LUNGFISH—ARRIVED AT THE
COODER AQUARIUM IN 1933; THE OLDEST
AND LARGEST KNOWN LUNGFISH IN CAPTIV-
ITY. 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."

(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.