

Live Sacrifice

by Terese Svoboda

The ex-husband holds the fish along its writhing middle. It could be someone's waist. It should be. He grips it wrong but tight. Here, he says, you could use it.

Use isn't the operative word, unless after taxidermy, it could be used to cover a hole in the wall. This is a fish too big to curl in a frying pan, too big for the broiler. Cut it into steaks? That would be slaughter.

All this while I open my arms and he lays the live fish in them so it can writhe right out and fling itself into the February melt.

I shriek.

Happy Valentine's, he says, and flees to his truck where he reaches down and finds the gear he likes best, reverse, and uses it all the way down my hill, waving and smiling.

The fish heaves itself under a lawn ornament, a tilting flamingo that finally looks right, about to impale the poor creature with its beak.

Dinner, I say like Banzi! and take up the fish by the tailfin and separate it from its flamingo. The dog has arrived. Where was he when I needed a bite taken out of the ex? A mustache of Kleenex clears up that question: he's found the new box. He barks fine at the fish despite a mouthful of pulp.

Fish live out of water a long time. That's why fishwives hit them over the head. I can't hit a fish over the head. I can probably hit my ex over the head with the fish but that opportunity has passed. I drop the fish into the umbrella stand but the stand teeters, wobbles-- in short, goes wild. I put the fish in the bathtub hoping it is saltwater and will expire quickly and quietly.

The fish swims.

I could bury it but that will require digging a hole, the dog's department.

A real beauty, the fish shows off the pink of its gills, the gold

sheen of its scales and then splashes me with its wide dark tail. I don't even know if it is edible. My ex might have plunged his hand into a tank in a Chinese restaurant as easily as fished it up out of the polluted city river with a hook.

I see no marks of a hook.

The dog is still barking.

I don't name the dog but the fish requires a name. Animals that do not get eaten must be named. The dog is still on the menu.

Florence. The first nurse. The part I played for my ex. Or what he now needs, our failed love still being so great?

I drop breadcrumbs in Florence's way. I will put her in a bucket while I take my morning shower.

My ex calls. It was delicious, I say. You should have stayed.

The next morning Florence is dead. Do I expect her to hang around forever like the ex? I jam her into a trash bag and fifteen minutes later, the dog rips his way through the plastic.

I will cook her for the dog.

I fry her a few inches at a time. I don't want to chop her up, somehow the ex will win if I use a knife on her like that. It isn't until I have to remove the bones for the dog and finally have to cut her open—I have work to do, this is taking a lot of time—it isn't until I am sliding the filets into the dog's bowl that a coin slips out.

It isn't one I've ever seen. Is it lucky? Florence didn't appear lucky—but she had grown to such a size. At least I made some money on her. I wash the coin and drop it into a cup on the mantel.

The dog looks more crazed than ever when I return from work but his bowl is clean. I take the coin out of its cup and look at it closely. It is one that kids use as tokens in game rooms. Poor Florence, swimming around, thinking she had swallowed a gold coin the way she was supposed to.

My ex comes by again only when the grass is green, while I am cutting it already a second time that summer. He stands at the edge of the lawn and muffles a laugh when I topple the flamingo and snap

it off at its knee. I don't want anything, I shout at him over the motor. Nothing, please nothing.

He doesn't leave, even after the dog runs out and tries to lick him to death.

I have to turn the mower off.

The guy has a lot of nerve, and big scarred hands from hard labor, the kind you do when you should do anything else. He is smart rolled into trouble. He wears a plaid hunting jacket straight out of the 70's. He wears it all the time, and it isn't as if he is trying to protect himself from hunters. Hi, he says as if he means it. I've run out of luck.

No, I say as if this is a surprise.

I can't find a single thing to bring you that you won't hate, he says. He puts up those hands as if they have been full of something for weeks.

This helpless technique has kept the two of us together for a couple of years too long. You know that fish? I say.

That one? he says, as if there are others.

It didn't die, I say. I still have it.

He takes a step closer. It isn't the fish. He can't help it, I attract him. What the hell for? he says.

The fish has been granting me wishes. It opens up its big pink mouth and says Okay, let her have another one.

We are not so far from each other. I have the mower in front of me, he has his arms poised.

I turn it on again. I wished for a new life, I say over its roar

His hands beat on his coat like the fish against the flamingo. Just like that.

