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The Well

Lydia Zidan

I came upon a well in a snowbank, just frozen over. Grey fish with grey scales swam beneath the surface. Their writhing bodies collided and intertwined in the cramped well. Despite this, the scene was serene. I traced my finger around the edge of the well, and a red-faced man poked his head out of the window of a nearby kitchen, explaining, “You pick what you eat”. My father was delighted at the concept of fresh fish on a cold, Austrian December morning. Lacking a similar affinity for seafood, I returned to the well and peered over the lip, below the ice. The grey fish continued to swim, unaware that with the point of a finger, they were doomed to the heat of a skillet. My father pointed to a fat lively one and as fast as it came into the well, it was whisked away by a green net. In the thirty minutes the chef’s work would take to make that fish a meal for my father, I became acquainted with their world. I scrutinized it and compared it to my own.

Their world: Grey fish, grey stone and a grey sky muddled and blurred by ice.

My world: White smoke billowing from the chimney of the kitchen, the red brick matching the red cheeks of my mother, the green of the fir surrounding the estate, the soft pink slippers of the ballerina who had performed the nutcracker the night before, the pale yellow sugar cookies that would decorate the bedpost Christmas morning, the plaid stockings on the mantel and the slate bodies of the fish.

Shocked by their meager conditions, I assigned roles to the fish, gave them jobs and families. One would be the mother, another—the smallest—the child, and a third—the biggest—the father. They were firefighters, veterinarians and doctors, all jobs I had learnt about in primary school. Despite their newfound meaning, the grey fish continued to swim undisturbed. Peering down into that their world, I could see their existence for what it was, and they could not. So, to make their sad state more palatable to myself, I had imagined to the best of my ability a reality I deemed meaningful, the only one I had known

in my seven years. Looking back upon that day, I realize that, like the fish, we all live within borders, both physical and transparent. To be aware of these limitations is to suffer. To remedy this suffering, we turn to the imagination to give our lives meaning and the illusion of freedom.

As we grow older, we begin to cope with our reality in ways outside of playing “house”. Despite the fact that religion most directly translates to the “return to bondage”, many devote their lives to a faith in the hope that they will be rewarded for their good deeds in an afterlife. Religion highlights and outlines the so-called borders we may possibly face and provides solutions. One great transparent border we face is our inability to comprehend or know what happens when we pass on. Religion and spirituality tell us where we are to go when we die and how to get there, a roadmap for life so to speak. Surprising enough, this is a border in itself. Awaking to the absurd and thusly scrambling for something that gives a semblance of meaning is simultaneously freeing and limiting. The realization that we will never truly comprehend our own existence, or that there may not even be someone or something out there that can, leaves us, at times, yearning for the security of the well. That is why it is necessary for the imagination to take over in the form of organized religion and the like. To devote oneself to a cause allows for control and therefore the illusion of freedom.

Maybe, instead, we reject reality altogether. We innovate and build a world that we deem fit. Think Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg. These men recognized the borders in their lives and turned to their imaginations to create something that bridged the gap between reality and what lies outside the well. On the flip side, we live off the grid, rejecting conventional societal markers of success (another border in itself). There are many ways to treat the pain that comes along with the specific human quality of self-awareness. All of these ways, too, result in the illusion of a self-earned freedom.

When I looked up from the reflection of my shattered visage in the well, the ice was already starting to reform at the edges and my father’s fish was ready. I shook the cold from my body and shuffled into a warm dining hall. The now bronze fish was placed in the middle of our table, and as I somewhat guiltily tucked into breakfast, the fish’s grey counterparts continued to swim undisturbed outside. No matter how much colour lies within our well, we are not fish. We will always strive to escape the borders that confine us, whether that be through physical means of evolution or the leap of a consciousness struggling to make something of random data.