



"A collection of creatures was brought to light, then and subsequently, that might have featured in the worst nightmares of a wood-alcohol addict; creatures with huge mouths and long needles for teeth... These and other monstrosities..."

— John Crompton, *The Sea* (1957)

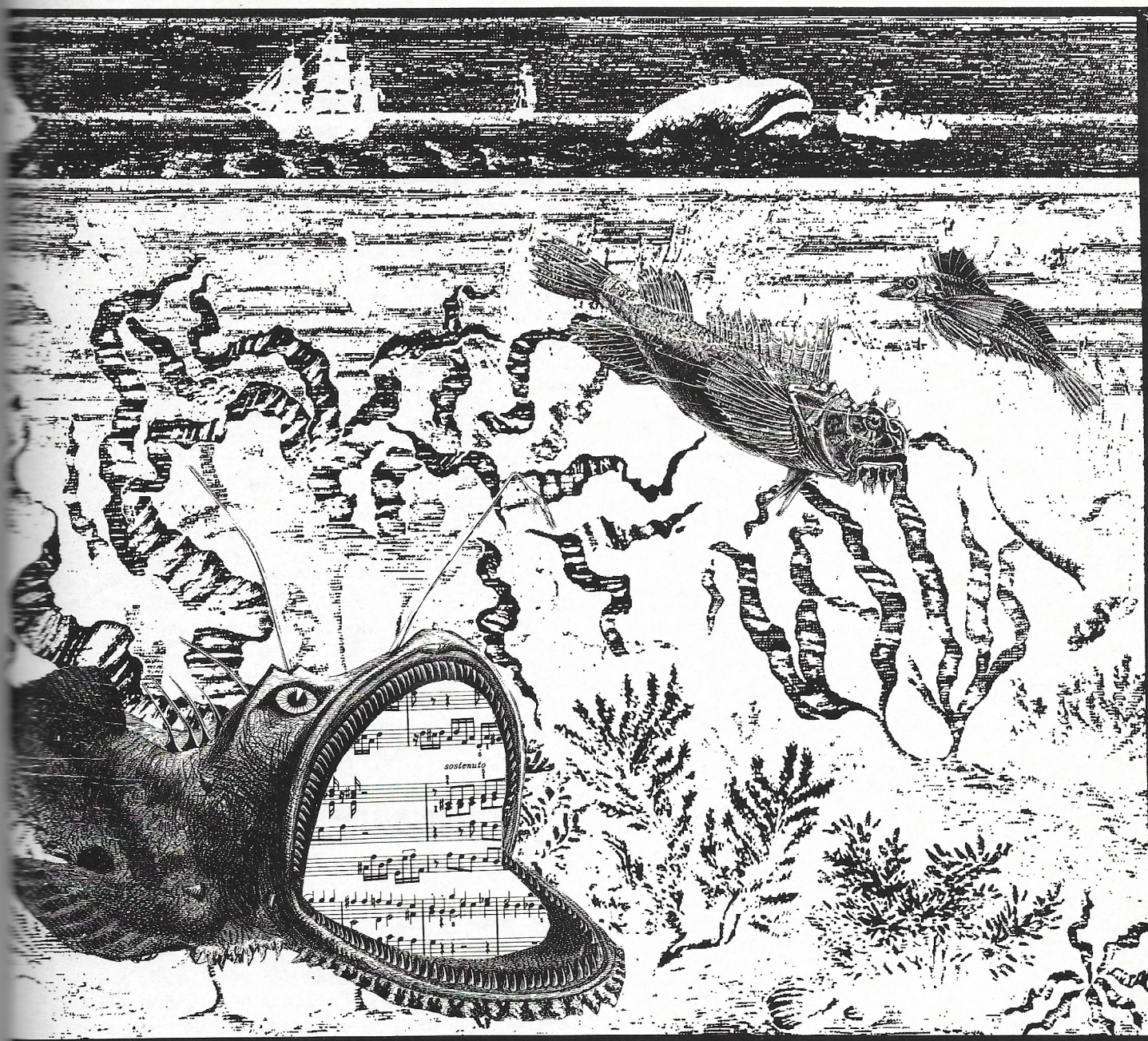
"Hmmmm. Looks like we're late, Katie. I hope all the good stuff hasn't been taken." Allen frowned at his watch, frowned at her, then started studying the holos. Or maybe it was the legs of the blonde in front of them in line.

Apparently, Allen was going to make her pay for the five extra minutes she'd spent slapping on makeup so she wouldn't look as pasty-white as the grub-worms that writhed in the holo at her elbow. She'd been on the keyboard for nearly a solid month, trying to finish her fantasia in time for the chamber's upcoming ArtFest, and it *showed*, just as Allen's petty irritation showed. He never came out and said anything about the time she spent composing, but he always managed to make her pay, somehow. Inviting half a

dozen people over for dinner when she was wrestling with the recalcitrant string section of her computer; refusing to make love with her when she came to bed exuberant over a new passage. Allen was a master at passive aggression. Katie sometimes thought Allen was jealous of her music, her creativity. After all, he worked in advertising, where the same three ideas were passed back and forth like STDs. But he seemed only too happy to spend her grant money on fresh salmon dinners and excursions like this to the ViRoplex. Allen might begrudge her her time at the keyboard, but he wasn't a fool. Being the husband of a successful composer had its perks.

"Have you tried out the mole yet?" a woman said behind her. "You're blind and you've got these paddles for arms. You practically swim through dirt looking for worms; it's wild. I've done it six times and I'm going again tonight if I can get in."

Her companion made sounds of approval. Katie thought of the time she and Allen had tried being moles and shuddered. Sure, you had paddles for arms and slime-covered earthworms tasted like the best



pasta in town, but the razor sharp teeth stuck fast in her memory. Or rather, in her shoulder. Allen had apologized for attacking her afterwards, promising they could stay with gastropods and molluscs from then on if she wanted. But she had told him to forget it. Katie knew he'd only been doing what came naturally – for a mole, that is. At least, she *hoped* that the vicious behaviour belonged to the ViRo-plex data systems and not to him. Sometimes she wondered exactly who was hosting whom, and whether *all* of Allen's aggression was of the passive type.

"Fleas and fish and barnacles." Allen turned around and sighed. "Did you hear that guy up there? That's all that's left, is fleas and fish and barnacles. I'm not gonna be a damn barnacle, Katie. Clinging to a rock all night. How boring can you get?"

"You don't have to be a barnacle, Allen," she said. "You don't have to be anything if you don't want. We could go home and watch a video." She nudged him with her elbow, trying to loosen him up. "We could go to a motel and register under pseudonyms."

He smiled a little at that, the anger dissipating. And

suddenly there he was – her Allen, the man she'd been charmed by three years ago, when she was convinced she would never create anything again. Not music, certainly not a baby. Allen, whom she'd married quickly, before he could change his mind about her or the child she so badly wanted. Warm, sexy, wry Allen. Who could in a fraction of a second become cold, angry, disapproving Allen. It was a transformation she'd never anticipated, a change that sickened, yet fascinated her. She'd tried to capture the transformation of Allen in her music, but never successfully. Bunched chords strutting up and down the keyboard, accidentals of course, melting into a slow flirting rhythm. A lazy waltz. With an edge. What do you mean you don't want to dance? Oh, never mind, I'm tired. Let's just sit here and listen with my hand inside your blouse like so. I said, like so.

That was close, but not exact. What she wanted to get but couldn't were his eyes. You just couldn't twist notes into anything that spoke of Allen's cold eyes. Or of the green fringe of carrot tops in a garden. Or of the taste of blood. At least she couldn't with the

perceptions she was born with. That's mainly why she'd started coming to the ViRo-plex. As a human, she had certain limits to her thought structures. As a mole, or a clam or a gnat, those limits would expand and contract, warp and shift like pieces of coloured glass inside a kaleidoscope. What she couldn't hear as a human, she might be able to hear as a bird or a bug. Or a rock or a tree or a star; it all depended on what show was in town. And once she could hear it, Katie knew she could write it and play it.

The other reason she came, of course, was because Allen liked it, just as Allen liked any new toy introduced on the market. He couldn't help it; it was the little boy inside dying for a chance to get his hands on the 21st century's version of G-I Joes. A little boy who would pout for days – weeks – if he didn't get his way. Katie wasn't crazy about the tacky promotions for the place – “Does a Bear Shit in the Woods? Find Out For Yourself at the Northwest Animal Virtual Show!” – or the Saturday night crowds of bored suburban professionals it attracted, but, like many, she couldn't afford the home unit. Not yet, anyway.

“God, about time,” Allen muttered as the crowd began to move again. They passed a holo of salmon swimming upstream and she thought of cold mountain water running through her gills, of the tug of a hook and the explosion of eggs from her gut. To spawn, to die. Such simplicity. Such beauty. She'd tried writing a nocturne to capture it, but had had little luck. The notes blotted her manuscript like drops of rain, dissipating as quickly.

“I wouldn't mind trying the fish tonight,” she said to Allen, thinking of resurrecting the unfinished nocturne, perhaps cannibalizing the melody as part of her fantasia, but it was too late. His eyes were on the next holo.

“Now *that* would be something,” he said, nodding towards a cinnamon-coloured grizzly ripping apart the salmon she'd been only a moment before. “I thought the black bear was good, but a grizzly. Talk about power.”

The muscles in his back tensed and she could sense him already lumbering through the woods in search of slow deer and tree trunks full of honey. In her mind, she heard contra bassoons, tympany.

“What's available tonight?” the man with the leggy blonde ahead of them asked the ticket taker. “Any eagles left? Or grizzlies?”

The ticket guy shook his head. “They both went an hour ago. Let's see here.” He punched a few keys in front of him and shrugged. “We got some barnacle spots open, a few anglerfish, some gastropods – slugs mainly. Couple of starfish. Couple of insects. You into dragonflies? Fleas? Always got lots of fleas open.”

“No, um, real animals?” the blonde asked, her voice shaky.

“You mean mammals?” the ticket guy said.

“Yeah, right,” she said. “Any mammals?”

Katie had seen this before. Some people were nervous about hanging out inside something other than a warm-blooded animal, even if it was just a computer re-creation of it. She figured they were afraid they might pick up bad habits – or maybe a set of antennae. There had been wild stories about people coming away from the ViRo-plexes with beaks and gills ever since the places opened, but those stories were all

nonsense, of course. Rumours started by the same sorts who attributed blindness and insanity to masturbation a hundred years before. The same hidebound sorts who determined the distribution of national art grants now, she reminded herself. Allen might tax her patience – and the limits of their wedding vows – but he was at least good for the checkmark next to the married box on her yearly grant application.

“No ma'am, no mammals,” the ticket taker said, pursing his lips as he regarded the crowd behind her. “So what'll it be?”

There was a whispered conference between the blonde and her husband. She wanted to leave; he was bullying her into going for the slugs. Katie felt like leaning over and telling her to let him have his way – it'd be worth it to see the look on his face after he realized he'd gnawed off his penis, as was the custom after slug sex – but she kept her mouth shut.

She didn't feel like talking much tonight; there was a line of notes in her head, or rather dancing around it. An elusive little flicker of melody that seemed to sing of sunlight through rain or perhaps it was Allen's eyes through her tears, something she'd seen often enough after one of their stupid arguments over his late-night “meetings.” The Devil Beating His Wife was the name of it, she decided, a phrase she'd found while leafing through a musty book of Southern memoirs from the first half of the 1900s. She had a feeling a lot of women knew how it went.

“No grizzlies, huh?” Allen said as the blonde and her husband scooted inside the door, tickets in hand. “How about bats, you got any bats?”

The ticket taker shook his head. “I got fleas, I got slugs, I got barnacles, I got anglerfish. Take your pick, mister.”

“Well, we've been slugs,” Allen said belligerently. “And I'm not gonna be a damned flea.”

“Suit yourself,” the ticket guy said, looking over Allen's shoulder.

“The anglerfish isn't bad,” a voice said behind them. It was the mole-woman's friend. Katie turned and the woman gave her a sly smile, as if they shared a secret, just the two of them. Allen's pants were undone and he didn't know it. She smiled back and the notes in her head rang truer. Did a pleasant little pirouette, then sank back down on their haunches and rocked back and forth slow and easy. A country ballad, lazy as an Alabama creek. Grammy in a chair, pass me my stitching there, honey. This here's a quilt-picture of your granddaddy. Immortalizing him? Hell no, I'm poking his face with a needle two hundred times a day.

The woman behind her spoke again. “If truth were to tell, I'd have to say the anglerfish is the best thing going here. Why don't you give it a try?”

She was beautiful – black hair with black eyes and a beauty mark the size of a dime near her mouth – which was the only thing that could have accounted for Allen's reaction. Katie knew how he felt about becoming a fish.

“Best thing going, huh?” he said, giving the woman a wide grin. He casually flipped a piece of plastic inside the ticket guy's window – my piece of plastic, thought Katie – and looked back to make sure the black-haired woman was watching. “Okay then, give me two anglerfish. Standard male and female package.

Baby, let's go swimming." The last was directed at Katie, although only peripherally. She looked back at the woman as Allen steered her away from the line and towards the door. The woman winked.

"What in heaven's name is an anglerfish?" her friend's voice carried behind them.

"She-devil," was the answer, a half-whisper that flitted about the notes in Katie's head, tossing them high with a nudge of the nose, a flip of the tail. Then the door swished shut and they were inside.

"The present inhabitants came from above like so many Satans falling from Heaven. Just as the fishes that first invaded land were rejects, so are most of the deep-sea dwellers, for no fish or any other form of life would have left the comfortable well-fed existence in the upper stories for a miserable existence in the basement unless it had to. In their new horrible environment the fishes changed... They assumed new shapes..."

— John Crompton, *The Sea*

The lobby was crowded, as usual, people loitering outside the studios like crows circling a landfill. The ViRo-plex had opened the summer before and had been drawing large crowds ever since. The shows were put together in software suburbs like the one where she and Allen lived, then distributed nation-wide the way movies used to be all the time. Many of the ViRo-plexes were converted theatre complexes, in fact, tucked between the espresso shops and body boutiques at the malls. The admission price was at least four times what a movie cost, but the Plex still boasted the same cheap carpeting, the same cement walls and crude fluorescent lighting. A few more cement walls had been added here and there; the stiff uncomfortable seats had been ripped out and replaced with stiff uncomfortable couches. Ushers in maroon vests took your tickets at the door, showed you to the right studios and helped you hook up to the headsets if you needed it. They even sold popcorn and candy at the snack bar out front or, for a few bucks more, let you rent a Snackjack which would simulate the experience of eating junk food without having to worry about the consequences. This latest innovation had become an instant hit and Katie had heard of three new Foodplexes — VR restaurants exclusively devoted to serving non-existent meals — that had opened in the area just in the past month.

Since VR was a relatively new form of entertainment, most of the ViRo-plex shows were simple recreations enhanced by sensory input culled from implants in lower life forms. My life as a dog and then some. Word had it, though, more complicated shows would be available to the public soon: space travel, simulated death, trips to the hereafter. This last possibility had caused an outcry from the fundamentalists who currently held sway in Congress, the same group who oversaw the distribution of the government art grants Katie had received for the past three years. They had been lobbying hard and fast against the VR heaven and hell, calling it an abomination and more, but since no government money went towards funding its development or distribution, they couldn't do much about it. Yet.

Even so, Katie did not plan on attending any of the more controversial shows when they did hit her

neighbourhood, although Allen had mentioned them several times already. The animal shows were real enough for her; she couldn't imagine any re-creation of heaven that would be anything close to the creative contentment she felt at swimming upstream to spawn or wrapping a fly with silk. More important, there was her future to think about. You never could tell who might casually let drop that she'd been seen attending an incorrect VR show. And who it might get back to. It was a cut-throat world, this world of art. And if you wanted to succeed, you had no choice but to play along. Either that or forego the grants and live on rice, beans and your integrity for the rest of your life.

Once inside, Katie and Allen skipped the popcorn — both the real and simulated — and hurried up the lobby towards the anglerfish room behind a maroon-vested young girl with a flashlight. Katie was excited to get going, full of a needle-like nervous energy she seemed to have picked up from the black-haired woman's laughing eyes.

"Anglerfish," Allen said and snorted. "I sure hope it's more fun than being a salmon. That was a real pain in the ass, trying to climb up that fish ladder. And for what? To dump my load, then kick the bucket. I didn't even get a chance to see what my kids looked like."

"I thought that would appeal to you," Katie said, slowing down to read the screen above a door. Careful now, girl, she warned herself. Careful, here. "I know how you feel about kids." Salamander, the screen read. Climb a tree, have you seen a slug? Lost my tail, grow another.

"Oh, I don't know," Allen said, slipping his arm around her as they moved to the next door. Timber wolf. Cry moon cry. Fresh meat slick. Hey, I'm in charge here. "It might not be *that* bad having a kid."

Katie looked up at him, trying to read the light in his eyes, impossible as always. Was he teasing her? Was he serious? A low ominous trill rumbled in her head. Minor seconds, deep in the bass, like distant thunder. "You want a baby?" she asked.

Her voice was neutral, no emotion. She could have been the usher. You want a popcorn? You want a Coke? The trill got louder. Diminished chords began to pace up and down the registers, slowly at first, then more and more frantic. Fractured chords with notes like glass. She listened to them and to the sounds of their steps and to the long silence that came out of Allen. A melody curled out of the silence, a sly melody — at once pleasing and fearsome.

The Devil Beating His Wife.

He stopped at a door. Looked down at her and laughed. His eyes were the colour of quicksand.

"Here we go again," he said.

Katie looked at the sign. Anglerfish, it read. And below it in flashing italics, *Warted She-Devil*.

"Follow me, please," the usher said, slipping between them to open the door. Katie hurried in behind her, Allen following.

The room was darkened, as it used to be before the film started. About a dozen people, couples or singles lay on low couches wearing patches over their eyes, plugs on their ears and gloves. Wires connected everything, including the small board next to the couch. They looked like children, fallen asleep listening to old-style Walkmans except for the beards, the wrinkles,

the bald spots and the occasional bulge in the men's pants. Nothing like seeing your partner in a new light to get your interest up again. A white-haired woman in a plaid jacket was just sitting up, the timer beside her couch blinking red.

"These over the eyes, these over the ears, these over the hands. Jack in there," the usher said pointing to the sets, the plugs. She handed them the standard release forms; they signed them and handed them back. Then the usher watched, emotionlessly, as Katie and Allen lay down and jacked in.

Water filled the room and the usher was gone.

Darkness. Cold. Katie floated in the depths of the ocean, hungry. Searching for food in the blackness. A flicker of lights invaded the darkness. Nebraska farmers with lanterns walking to their barns? No, she saw now they were fish. Flashing green, pink, white, colours that she could not name. Distended eyes, flashing headlamps, monstrous jaws. And she was one of them. Hungry and alive, ready to snap, ready to flee. A smaller fish flitted near her, rubbing its scales against her fin. She tasted briny flesh and started to bite it – ahah! food, there – then stopped. There was something about the eyes. Allen?

The smaller fish swam around her as if in awe of her size. She was twice as big as it, easily. She flicked her tail and the little fish was carried away by the current. She turned towards it and worked her over-size jaws. The look in its eyes became something she knew well. Fear. Good.

Katie swam. When the little fish approached, she nudged it, tumbling it away, then swam closer, tickling it with the splayed plume that hung down near her lip. The water was cold and good. The darkness thick with life. Lights everywhere. Something to eat, something to avoid. She fed and swam. Let the little fish approach and suck at her scales. When it bit into her neck, she felt joy.

"Food was short so those that 'lived on each other' could not afford to miss any opportunity and grew enormous mouths and wicked teeth."

– John Crompton, *The Sea*

The next day, after Allen went to work – he was vying for a copywriting contract with the new SquirTaco place at the Foodwheel – Katie looked up anglerfish in the computer. As she tapped keys, calling up menus, sweeping through references, a song swam through her head, a wet song. Soggy chords resonating with tears and seawater, kelp and shrimp and baby shoes.

The melody played over and over, making her think of the water from the night before, remembering Allen's teeth sinking into her flesh and the burst of pain and satisfaction it had given her, remembering the incredible power that she'd felt at the close of his small pincerlike jaws about her scales.

That inexplicable joy had stayed with her long after leaving the virtual couch and the crowded lobby and the parking lot thick with fin-tailed cars. It warmed her, freeing her tongue, making her laugh as she chattered on about inconsequential: the price of cheese, the nose on that man. Allen, on the other hand, had been subdued. He always fared better on land than in the sea.

"What's the matter with you? Didn't you like it?" Katie had asked as he pulled out of the ViRo-plex parking lot. She'd been transfixed by the beauty of the deep water. The cold seemed to awaken something in her. "I thought it was great. Really vivid."

"It was vivid, all right," he said. "Electrocution is probably vivid, too. Self-immolation. Lightning strike. I'm sure they're all thrillingly vivid." He wouldn't talk the rest of the way home. Pouting again, although he would never admit it. Headache, he would tell her. "I'm just not feeling myself lately. No, there's nothing you can do." Not lovemaking, not massages, not begging, pleading, yelling. She'd tried it all and had learned that ignoring him was the only way to save her sanity.

She didn't mind the quiet of the car; she filled it easily with her melodies, always rich after delving into the mind of another species. Golden notes flowing like water. Sprightly trills like fleeting eels, darting fish. She pursued the melodies as if they were rays and snakes and squirting sea urchins, burrowed deep inside a harmony for the last tasty morsel of a note.

At home, her hunger was more literal. After rooting around in the cupboard, she'd found a tin of sardines and pounced on them, biting off the heads with quick efficient snaps. Allen had watched her from a dark chair, wincing each time her teeth clicked shut.

Katie smiled, thinking of his moody silence. A year ago, it would have devastated her. Her beautiful Allen, unhappy. Possibly even mad at her. Now, she found it childish. And not a little annoying. She brought the file she wanted to the screen and forgot him entirely.

The information on the anglerfish was sketchy, but intriguing. It used the second name – warted she-devil – just as the ViRo-plex had last night, but gave no explanation for it whatsoever. It did, however, explain the angler part of its name – a moniker derived from its habit of "fishing" for unsuspecting fingerlings with a cord of flesh that extended from its head to below its lip, a dancing snake of mutated dorsal fin. Although usually found at 6,000 feet, anglerfish were occasionally pulled out of the upper reaches of the Northwest waters by a fisherman's net. One such fish had been found by a shrimp fisherman in Oregon eleven years before the turn of the century. A female, twelve inches long. Along with a two-inch male, permanently attached by his mouth to her head.

Katie read the rest of the information quickly, then stayed at the computer terminal for a long time afterward. An idea teased at her, tantalized just outside her perception, like a bit of bobbing flesh dancing before a mesmerized fingerling.

"Life in this underworld must be rather like the night life in the slums of certain cities in the old days: single assassins carrying knives prowling in the dark. Similarly the assassins in the sea basement prowl around, but for the most part they must prowl to no effect and grow hungry. So when they do find a victim it may have to last them a long time."

– John Crompton, *The Sea*

Allen came home from his meeting in the afternoon; Katie was busy at the composing keyboard and didn't notice what time it was

passage. Allen had decided to make up, apparently, and just in time to chase a bit of inspiration out of her head, as was his style. Allen was rarely overtly hostile, in fact, his interruptions were usually very friendly, which made her feel all the more frustrated. "I just missed you and thought you'd like a little snack," he'd say, setting a plate of grapes and cheese down on top of her power switch, wiping out an afternoon's work. "Oh no, did I do that?" No, Allen never meant to do any harm. His intentions were always the best, the most noble. Unless, of course, she crossed him.

"I'll be done in a few minutes," she called when his knocking around in the kitchen became too hard to ignore. Any louder and it would start to show up on her recordings. She'd used samples before, but wasn't interested in Allen's petulant offerings. "I've just got to enter in a few more woodwinds."

She flipped switches on her keyboard – oboe, clarinet, flute, and yes, more violin – distilling the sound she needed, overlapping them onto the four, five, six? tracks of sound she'd added this afternoon, creating the resonance of a full orchestra here, creating a totally new sound there. Piano notes that you blew like a flute. Trumpet blasts that beat from a drum. Katie layered the music together the way the encyclopedias she'd read as a child layered the cellophane diagrams of bones and muscle tissue and blood vessels together until there stood a man.

The fantasia was going to be a success, she thought, playing back her day's work, noticing a missed note here, a weak passage there. But would it be good enough to secure another grant? Would her music alone be enough any more, especially when the competition was growing tighter and tighter? The grants seemed to be going to the most stable and sanctimonious of applicants: a pious sculptor with five home-educated children, a Church of Christ painter who'd been married to the same man for fifty-one years.

She entered a few notations on the keypad, scribbled some notes to herself on the sheet of hard copy she always kept in front of her when composing, and closed down. The piece might be a commercial success, but artistically it was empty, she knew. The melody she wanted to infuse into it had slipped away from her, like the fingerlings had the night before 6,000 feet below sea level. Sometimes, she wondered if the real reason she wanted a child was to convince herself that she could, indeed, create something of worth and beauty, if not with her music then with her genes.

Or was there another reason, a voice whispered inside her. A far more self-serving reason.

She quieted the voice, thinking of a child. Her child. She would be tiny, delicate as a Chopin waltz. Pattering of feet on hardwood, coo and clatter. Laughter and milk. Small hands tugging at her pencils. Lullabies in pink flannel. That would be her child. Except. Except. Allen. Allen was balking now at the idea of her conceiving despite his murmured assurances before their marriage vows. Allen had, in fact, told her months earlier that he had no intention of fathering a child, a circumstance neatly guaranteed by the semen-deadening chemstick embedded in his left bicep.

Katie had grown to despise the stick in his arm.



and at times, to despise Allen for its existence. It bulged slightly under the smooth skin – a mocking reminder of lust-hardened genitals, of a belly full with child. She often stroked it at night after he'd fallen asleep, wondering just when its effect would wear off; Allen would never say. At times – mainly when she woke from dreams to find herself cradling only her sweaty bedclothes – she would squeeze the lump gently between thumb and forefinger, pondering the consequences of popping the hard knot of chemicals from his arm like pus from a pimple.

"A certain species, of the angler-fish tribe, judging by all the specimens secured, possessed only females. No males were ever found, even when such ought to have been hanging around. It was rather a mystery. Where was the husband of this female who regularly produced her fully fertilized eggs?"

– John Crompton, *The Sea*

"I've got an idea," she said, coming out of her studio. It was the first one she'd had in three days, ever since Allen had been edged out of the SquirTaco account for a competitor and had decided to "make himself useful" by building her a new worktable. "Why don't we go down to the ViRo-plex and see if there are any grizzlies open?"

Allen shrugged, his eyes on the planer he was using to level the table's legs. He was playing with her again, waiting for her to come to him, to coddle him, to beg and plead and cajole him, to tell him that he was the only one that mattered, that what she did was secondary, unimportant. She stood at the threshold of her studio watching him guide the instrument across the slivered wood, scattering dust onto the kitchen floor where it would settle and stay until she cleaned it up. Just as the dishes on the counter, the dustballs on the floor, the pubic hair and urine that rimed the toilet bowl would all stay until she cleaned them all up.

She'd tried to endure his pounding and knocking and sawing, but had only gotten a headache for her trouble. Some time at the ViRo-plex might give her the inspiration she needed, as well as sooth Allen's rumbled ego. It was the best she could do. It was *all* she would do.

Allen seemed to sense that. "I don't know," he said, picking up the electric saw. "I don't want to keep you from your work. I know how important it is to you." He turned on the saw and touched the wood, a harsh shrieking piercing Katie's patience, just as it had pierced her concentration all afternoon. Just as Allen had intended.

He turned the saw off and set it onto the linoleum floor, next to the leather work gloves he'd picked up at the hardware store the day before. On her account, of course. She held her breath, counting. When she looked at him again, he was grinning at her, nodding towards the floor. In the sawdust, there was a message. K + A.

She smiled at him, even though her mouth hurt. She didn't love Allen any more; it was that simple. She didn't even *like* him. The knowledge filled her head like the smell from the sawdust. Somewhat pleasant, somewhat irritating.

"Come on," she said again, trying to keep the annoyance out of her voice. "I could use a break from the keyboard." And from you, Allen. And from you,

She didn't think she hated him, although it didn't seem far off. Her composing had suffered with him wandering around from room to room, busily hyping his home improvement projects to her, to his friends on the phone. And she was fast approaching the deadline the chamber had set for her contribution to the ArtFest. A missed deadline now would mark her as unreliable. A blot on her record, to be passed along to the national arts commission. She couldn't afford that. Not when there were so many other hungry artists out there. Allen was slitting his own throat, but Allen was too self-absorbed to see that. It was more important that she be made to suffer.

In a way, it was ironic. She had asked him for a child and he had given her himself instead, but she was in no mood for irony. She needed notes, melodies, rhythms and variations. She needed to write music before she went mad.

"So, what about the ViRo-plex?" Her tone came out sharper than she intended.

Allen looked up, his beautiful eyes narrowing. "Yeah, sure. Why not," he said after a minute. "I could use a change of scenery." He might have smiled, a self-satisfied smile since this was what he'd wanted all along, but Katie had already left the room to get her purse.

She paused at the bathroom mirror only a moment, but it was long enough to notice the lines that furrowed her brow, recessed her eyes. She was starting to look old, too old to attract another man. Not that she wanted to leave Allen and remarry; you could lose your grant for a divorce just as easily as for a homosexual encounter. There was nothing down on paper that said you couldn't live your life as you chose, of course; that would be trampling all over the Bill of Rights. But everyone knew that traditional family values were smiled upon by the commission. And generously rewarded. She had known that when she married Allen. She wondered if that was the real reason *why* she had married Allen. It was a moot point now. She didn't love him any more, but she knew she couldn't afford to leave him, either.

Since it was a weeknight, the ViRo-plex was nearly empty. No crowds, no nervous blondes, no exuberant mole-women. Katie looked for the black-haired woman who had recommended the anglerfish, but didn't see her. Even the regular ticket-taker was different, replaced by a ginger-haired woman who surrendered two tickets for the grizzly room wordlessly.

The two of them went inside and settled onto the couches, signing away any responsibility on the part of the ViRo-plex for their lives. Satisfied, the usher plugged them in, then disappeared. Along with the half dozen others in the room, Katie became a bear.

Lumbering through the woods, she tried to call up the music that had always been a part of the experience, but had little success. For a moment the warning buzz of bees vibrated into a steady ramble up and down the bass, winding and convoluted as her feelings towards Allen had been the past few months; but then it was gone, fleeting as the sting of a bee through her heavy hide. She chased after the melody, splashing through water, digging among clover, but it refused to return. Resigned, she ate grubs and watched Allen through slitted eyes.

He seemed content as a bear, rooting through the

dirt for a shivering marmot or rotting mountain lily bulb with equal glee. Katie watched him fell an elk with a swipe of his paw, nearly topple a pine scratching his back. Inevitably, he turned to her and she felt cold as he approached her, his eyes small and murderous. He nuzzled at her, nudged her and she pulled away, only to be swatted with a meaty paw. She backed up and he came forward, sniffing, exploring. He wanted her, the look in his eyes said, wanted *all* of her, not only her vagina, but her music, her soul. Everything. She whimpered as he entered her, as he bit her neck, growled low in her ear. She closed her eyes, trying to ignore his grunting, his grabbing, but she couldn't. He was eating the melodies in her mind, eating them as surely as he would eat her cubs had she had them.

When their timers cut the connection and Katie found herself back on the hard couch surrounded by curtain-covered cement walls, Allen seemed in better spirits, talking animatedly of an idea for a new advertising campaign while they strolled past the virtual rooms. As they passed the anglerfish room, Katie hesitated, thinking back to the melodies that had filled her mind after leaving the studio.

"Allen, I want to do this one again," she said and he laughed, snaking his arm around her.

"Cold fish," he said and bit her ear. She thought of his tiny mouth biting through her scales and shuddered. Absently, she rubbed at a patch of skin near her mouth. It felt dry. Scaly.

"Come on," she said. "I need it. For my music. Let's do it again. Please?"

"What now? Two in one night?" He looked at his watch, yawned. Feigned thought. Theatrics, always theatrics with Allen.

"I was hoping we could get to bed early," he said. "I wanted to get up and go make the rounds. I talked with some people today about picking up some freelance work. You want me to be a contributing partner, don't you? I know I've been driving you nuts hanging around the house. I'm only happy when I'm working, Katie. Just like you. You want me to be happy, don't you?"

"Yes," Katie said, touching the door. "I want that." She could almost feel the water through the grain of the wood. Cool, black, brackish. A string of notes bubbled up from her subconscious, broke through. Allen's eyes through tears, no, rain, no, water. His mocking smile as he mounted her, still smelling of someone else's musk.

The Devil Beating His Wife.

"Well, I would think you'd understand that I need to get out there and pound the pavement then. I mean, you're the one who's always talking about having kids, raising a family. You know how much money that takes."

She pressed her face against the wood, hoping to hear the music again, to feel the water flow through her gills again, to smother her senses with nothing but cold. To block out Allen and his convenient lies, his machinations. He would never give her a child – not as long as the chemstick was in his arm, and he had no intention of having it removed – and she couldn't have a child by anyone else and still keep getting the grants. There was too much risk, too much competition from other artists who would be only too



happy to pass along a waggle of gossip to the chamber and eventually, the national arts commission. Allen himself might even do that to her. He seemed to hate her music that much. Katie knew she was trapped. She needed her music, but to create it she needed the money. And that meant playing by their rules. She yearned for a better life, a life amid the deep, the cold. The water. A person could get lost in water that deep for a long time. Perhaps forever. The black-haired woman had been right. There was nothing better than the bite of the cold.

"I'd really like to do the anglerfish again," she said. "It's important to me, Allen. Very important. I need to hear the song again, to find it again."

"Sure, sure, baby, we'll do it again. I promise," Allen said, but his mind was already on the woman ahead of them, hurrying towards the exit door. "Maybe this weekend." He chuckled. "Hey, nobody else will want to."

"The truth, when it came to light, was indeed surprising. The male, when very young and very small, bites the skin of the female, and holds on. He holds on so tenaciously that in time he becomes embedded in her flesh and her skin grows over the aperture and imprisons him. He is now a part of her and gradually becomes even more so. Her veins merge into his. His heart and digestive system decay away..."

— John Crompton, *The Sea*

They didn't go, of course. Allen had plans — business plans, he called them, with a sharkish grin.

"Charlie farms out contracts all the time," he told her. "He likes my ideas, but I've got to jolly him along, you know how it works. Buy him a few drinks, a few laughs. Come on, Katie, don't be a stick. You know how it is in my line of work."

She did know, even though Allen had no concept how it was in her line of work; he never listened to her music any more, never came to the performances. And at this point, her line of work was seriously behind schedule, as the chamber's executive secretary informed her when he called Saturday morning.

"If completion of this fantasia is proving too taxing to your creativity, Katherine, the chamber would be more than happy to suggest a collaborator," he'd told her, his tone cool as kelp. Katie knew there were probably hundreds of willing collaborators standing in the wings, waiting for her to fall. But she would disappoint them.

She assured the executive secretary her contribution was nearly completed — tasting the lie on her lips as she did — and gladly accepted the advance on her quarterly stipend that he offered as a show of good faith. And more precisely as guilt money. It wasn't a lot of money, compared to what she would receive when the fantasia was complete, but it was enough for the both of them to live on for several months in relative comfort, even if Allen didn't return to work. It was more than enough to last until the new round of grants were awarded, which the secretary hinted she would be receiving — provided the fantasia was all that she had promised. It was also enough to buy a home ViRo unit.

Katie chose the latter.

Allen, when he returned home the next day, was

"God, you even got a program for grizzlies," he said, flipping through the selections. "Salmon, otter, eel, duck..." You kind of went overboard on the sealife, didn't you? Why didn't you get anything new? You know I want to try out the off-planet stuff they're selling now. A little variety now and then is not gonna kill you, Katie."

Katie gave him a flat smile, watching as he read through the operating instructions. She had already read through them, as well as all the available fine screens, some legal, some not — many times herself. She'd found it nearly as satisfying as composing. They had a certain beauty, a sinuous electronic melody that she had begun to sing softly to herself. Eels, they were, slipping through the charged black water. She would slip with them. Sting and slither, cut through the dark. Light there. Catch and squeeze and the light.

"What made you decide to get this?" Allen asked. He was bent over the unit, one hand caressing it, his back to her.

"I thought it might shake loose some ideas," she said. "For both of us." She thought of her fantasia, floating within the memory of her composing computer like a perpetual foetus. A foetus that would destroy her if she couldn't give birth to it, just as breech births had destroyed women years before.

Allen nodded, flicking switches. "Yeah, good thinking. I've been feeling pretty stale lately. Guess you have, too. I noticed you haven't been in your studio the past couple of days."

"No, not much," she said, looking over Allen's shoulder. The water was there, inside that unit. The water that held the notes, the melodies, the music that she needed. And what else? A new life for her? She'd thought of little else since bringing the ViRo unit home.

"Looks like it's all hooked up," Allen said, plugging the phones snug over his ears. "They come out and install all this when I was in town?"

Katie shook her head, feeling numb. Did you feel numb during childbirth, or did you feel pain? Should she feel pain now? She didn't know.

"I did it," she said, watching him. He had the grizzly program already plugged in, as she knew he would. As much as Allen revered the creature, he wasn't much like it. Grizzlies were wild, unpredictable. Allen was neither. Allen was cruel, though. The kind of hard-eyed cruelty that liked to destroy beauty because it was there, just as he wanted to destroy her music because it was there. Because it got in his way. Because she loved it, because he could.

"Come on," he said, handing her a headset. "Let's test it out." He hadn't showered yet from his night out; she could still smell the tequila on him, the stale perfume as well. Allen loved his toys, but Katie could no longer afford to provide them for him. She had to think of herself now, her own survival.

She shook her head. "You go ahead," she said. "I want to try to work on the keyboard for a while."

"Now I know why you got this thing," Allen grinned, the pads over his eyes blocking out her guilty pause. "You want to keep me out of the way while you go in there and write your songs."

"My songs," she said and sighed, thinking about the number of times she'd told him they were not

my music, have you Allen?"

He grinned at her, like a little kid playing pirate with two eyepatches. "Hey, they pay the rent," he said. "I'm not complaining. Even if they do sound like the stuff they play on the light rail."

"Yes, they pay the rent," Katie said. And they would keep on paying it for as long as she played the game. Artist. Wife. Mother. She could be it all; she wanted to be it all. Didn't she? She had no choices any more. It was the only way. "They also keep me sane. I need to write music, Allen. I need to create. It's the only thing that matters to me. You know that, don't you? The only thing."

"Sure, babe. I know that," he said. He lay back on the couch. "And you know what matters to me. And what doesn't. Timer all set?"

"Everything's ready for you," she said and watched him jack in. His face relaxed beneath the eye pads; his body seemed to sink into the cushions.

His face shifted slightly and Katie found herself looking at a younger Allen, the Allen she'd met three years ago after a concert at the Lake District amphitheatre. He told her he loved her music then, among other things. She wondered if he'd been lying then, wearing the mask of an enraptured admirer, or if he had somehow metamorphosed into the person he was now, the way tropical fish had metamorphosed into other creatures that swam the cold murky depths 6,000 feet below. And what kind of creature had she changed into herself? And what might she yet become? She shivered, but felt happy.

Katie watched him for a few minutes, then went into her studio and began to work on the fantasia. The house was quiet and the sound of cars and children playing in the street became muted as if they'd had to travel through dirt or water. Soon, even those sounds diminished to nothing; the house became the tiny cottage in the bottom of a goldfish bowl and she the fish flitting about the cool water, music bubbling out of her like air. She took a simple melody, inverted it, spread the notes into chords, arpeggios, transposed them to another key, found their soul. Played them, played with them. A deeper melody began to rise out of the ripple of notes. Sly and hesitant, pleasing and fearsome at the same time. A song of water and pain, beauty and deception. *The Devil Beating His Wife*? Perhaps she'd been hasty with that title. After all, there were many types of devils. Some with wives and some with husbands.

She danced it along the keyboard in a strutting polonaise; took it in her arms and waltzed with it across the ballroom floor; she pared it down to its bones, tiny and delicate, fishbones, yes, and rocked it to sleep in a lullaby.

She captured a part of it, scrawled the notes onto her manuscript, stored the section onto the computer's memory to work with later. To stroke, to coddle, to feed, like a child. Her child. She knew the fantasia would be complete soon. And after that, another. When she looked at her watch, three hours had passed.

Walking out to the living room, Katie looked down at Allen, still lying on the couch. He was at rest, his face unlined by greed, envy, lust for the blonde woman's legs. It had been such a simple matter to

relabel the programs, switching his grizzly with her anglerfish. Dismantling the unit's automatic alarm mechanism had proved more difficult, but with enough money in the right accounts you could access any information that you needed.

She thought of Allen swimming through the cold depths searching for a female to latch onto; was he flitting through the water now searching for her? She would join him soon enough. Katie loosened his belt, unzipped his pants and began to stroke him, slowly, deliberately. As she'd hoped, he quickly responded. She reached inside his shorts and cupped his testicles, they grew hard and tight in her hand. Ready to give her what she wanted.

She pulled her hand away and went out to the kitchen to find some dinner – a can of tuna fish, a slice of walnut bread. Allen would be getting hungry soon, she thought, regarding the knife as it sliced through the bread. Allen would be getting hungry and she would have to do something about that.

She lined up the blade of the can opener with the rim of the tuna fish can, then pushed, clear juice squirting out onto her fingers. It wouldn't be too hard to find a vein through which to give him the nourishment he'd need, she thought, twisting the handle until the top of the can was severed; she could learn to administer an IV, just as she would learn to clean up his waste.

She thought about the chemstick embedded in his left arm and smiled, using the tip of her knife to work a piece of walnut loose from the bread. No, it wouldn't be hard to take care of her husband, perhaps no harder than assuring a means to fertilize her eggs. She was an anglerfish now, a she-devil, a dweller of the deep.

And in the deep, you did what you had to do to survive.

"In his almost empty body [the male's] testes enlarge and develop like some cancerous growth until his whole inside is crammed. To all intents and purposes he is now merely a bag of sperm, and the female can be said to contain both ovaries and testicles. For she can draw on his sperm as she desires whenever she lays her eggs."

– John Crompton, *The Sea*

Diane Mapes is one of the very best of the newer American sf-and-fantasy authors. Her most recent story for us was "Nesting" (issue 59). She lives in Washington State.

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