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Selling Light

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Extract

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ONE

In the Antarctic, white sea-spiders sit in shallow blue waters under a thick layer of turquoise ice. Five, six, maybe ten bleached bodies rest upon eight-legged thrones, each spindly limb standing up on delicate tiptoe, paused, ready to scuttle, to kick around and break the suspension, but not just yet. They are frozen; for several minutes there is no movement at all, energy accumulates. And then, suddenly, a long segmented icicle-leg lifts, and replaces itself an inch from its original position. The clustered vigil lets time pass through it, eerily ambivalent, dismissive of our gaze. Theirs is a passive existence, patient, paradoxically self-aware and superior. It is only a matter of seconds before some activity will begin, inspired by instinct, nature, necessity perhaps, but free from the heavy awkwardness which humans call living.

Briege sighs. She has read about them and seen pictures in books, spending hours musing on their abstracted existence, wishing that they were not so distant, wishing that she could know them, wishing almost that she could be like them. She has brought her book with her, an encyclopaedia of sea life, and it is mostly useless. She knows of almost all the animals inside, and the attempt at classification does nothing but increase her exasperation. For every small plankton or mollusc there is a population of millions, most of which will remain unknown to the whole world, which can only know them in plural form; plankton, sea slugs, mussels, limpets, crabs, jellyfish, starfish and anemones in their multitudes, individually neglected.

The picture of the white sea-spiders is the only good thing about the book. Of course the editor is clearly an idiot, since he has reduced the picture to a thumbnail image in the corner of a page near the back of the book (being 's', and with the dictionary being organised by common name, the matter of its position is more understandable). Still, she can conjure the beings up into her mind and tread water around them, relishing the pleasure she gets from watching what she secretly desires – like any true voyeur.

She can't concentrate though. It's too cold, and she's in a caravan. There's a rustling noise coming from outside, and Briege is imagining a varied cast of contemporary criminals congregating outside her van; burglars, serial killers, axe-murderers. This breed probably hangs around caravan parks, rustling the grass, ready to go fishing for young girls.

All her life, she has watched crabs, cuttlefish, and prawns being hauled up in their nets by the thousands, by the local desensitised fishermen with their big, homogenous hands, numb extremities attached to something called men. She has agonised over the creatures, which were only valued when dead, mostly to be exported, and eaten. After her parents had put her to bed she would close her eyes, and bring the dead sea-creatures to life, watching them in their aquatic world, moving with them through the seconds of her sleep, feeling connected to each and every one of them. She tries now to close her eyes and reach for some comfort in the vision, but she has grown up a bit and lost some of the ability. Anyway, the rustling is too loud.

Eager not to prolong her fate, she decides to see who it is that wants to eat her, and draws back the curtain of the van. There is a man, bearded, hunched beside the next van. Briege inhales quickly and averts her eyes to the mounds of black, which are horses sleeping in the moonlight, or maybe not. She wishes that she was one of them, instead of the girl about to be fished.

She closes the curtain, for this is actually happening. He not only looks like a murderer, he also resembles a fisherman. Her fate is sealed. She courageously peers out again and sees this time that he is going into the front door of the adjacent caravan. Actually, he falls into it, his legs still protruding from the step.

It's been three minutes, and the man has not moved. Briege, still at the window, hardly breathing, realises that the man is no

longer a threat so there is only one thing to do. She goes outside with her sketchbook and her encyclopaedia. She hunches on the grass to the right of the legs and begins to draw the man, with big sweeping movements. She cannot see his face, but reassured of his vitality by his snores, she proceeds to capture his form, leaning the pad on the encyclopaedia, which is also a ready weapon should the man wake up and try to fish her.