

CREATIVE WORKS

Reach

Yesterday, for the third day in a row, the doctor left work early. Yet every night he arrived home late, telling his wife that he needed to walk by the shore a little. His wife treats all this as simply as she can, but each time thinking that next time she will ask him why. Tonight he calls her from his car as he heads out to see another patient on-call. There are weekend plans to arrange, next week will be better, and I love you.

At the house, the man's son opens the door and lets the doctor in. The hall light is on, but otherwise, only a bluish glow from the bedroom. The two talk a little at the door, then the doctor walks to the bedroom alone. A large man lies tilted and still on his bed and a television sends flashes of light across the room, but makes no sound. The room is mostly dancing, television shadows, now set against the wall, now part of the night, now off for a moment. The erratic blue light makes the man look unreal. The doctor doesn't turn on the light, he doesn't step into the room, doesn't call to the son, but instead he pauses a moment. Just for a moment, he is still, and he waits.

The doctor recalls stepping into the operating room as a student. His hands and forearms clean and dripping, back first into the room with hands held up in front of him. He turns toward the table, where the anesthetist leans over the patient's arm, a nurse scrubs the patient's belly and two other nurses sort supplies. The resident doctor has put on his gloves and gown, and leans toward the open medical chart. The student doctor turns and stops with his arms up like this, here, dripping a little. No one has noticed him yet. And just for a moment things are still. To keep his hands sterile, he can touch nothing. He hasn't read the patient's chart and is uncertain of what operation will follow. No one expects much of him, but per-



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haps to hold a clamp or retractor now and then. But from all that has led him to this point, he is momentarily and absolutely free to do nothing, just be still, and wait. Then someone hands him a cloth to dry his hands and the world begins again.

The son coughs in the kitchen and the world begins again. The doctor steps in, turns on the light, and asks down the hall if the son would like to come in. The rest follows as it should. The doctor listens to the man's chest and confirms that he is dead. He completes the death certificate, helps the son make arrangements with a funeral home and, after some words with the son, the doctor leaves the house.

Outside, the strange feeling returns. Once again, he feels a distant urgency that he must somehow escape himself. Years ago, in his travels, he developed a sort of panic, and for a time it ran through his days. And then it left. A few weeks ago the panic returned, but he can't understand from where, and despite the distance, it has returned familiar and sure-footed. It runs down the same trails left behind all these years, he thinks.

He starts the car and drives to the pier. He gets out and walks toward a crowd gathered near the end. By the time he reaches them, the strangeness has overwhelmed him. He catches some of the words, vaguely, and someone points to the water. The light from the pier reaches a few feet into the dark green, and there, several small, ghostly shapes appear, pause and vanish. At once, weighted lines drop into the water, and all around people speak. He asks what they are doing, and an older man points to several buckets and laughs.

The doctor walks to the buckets. A squid, perhaps a foot long, creeps along the deck. The eye is brightly reflective, and the body is vaguely translucent like thin soap. Little arms pull and splay and drag the body along. Ink lies all about the wet wood planks, making him wonder how many squid have slid out before this one. Another man picks up the squid and puts it back in the bucket. The doctor's heart pounds and he feels unreal. And then, as if from far off, he thinks, be still, and wait.

For half an hour he waits and

watches them jig for squid. He remains quiet, and no one takes much notice of him, though they seem to accept him. His fear recedes. The men talk and smoke. Now he feels safe among them, near the lights, the cigarette smoke and the laughter. By the time he begins back to the car, he is simply tired. Yet he continues to imagine the little arms of the squid reaching in all directions. Nothing for it but to blindly reach and pull, with one eye against the wood, the other staring into the heavens.

Another call. This time to the little

two-room clinic that serves as the emergency department. The nurse motions the doctor to the first room. A man sits on the bed and weeps. The doctor knows him well from his practice, but as he steps into the room, as the man looks up at him, as the light hums a little above them, as all this collects into a moment, somehow the doctor can recall nearly nothing. The doctor does not speak, he does not turn back to telephone the psychiatrist, he does not pick up the chart. The man on the bed stares, but is now silent. For a moment, the doctor feels

himself suspended somehow, between this room and nothingness. Then he stutters, his eyes become teary, and slowly he smiles and extends his hand toward the man.

“To begin,” the doctor says, “be still, and wait.”

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