

“Below”

By Silas Cairn

The gull lies rotting. Within its exposed rib cage, Caleb can make out the red synthetic remains of artificial fish bait—now a common occurrence around coastal fishing towns. The air is stale and dry like the breath from a dying man. The two stroke diesel pummels the water, whirring noisily in a throaty rhythm that makes his teeth vibrate. Even the sea feels wrong. Caleb focuses his attention on the tepid coastline—viscous brown sludge clings to rocks like raw sewage upon a city sewer grate, assailing the air with an unnatural pungency. The odor of expiry.

Duncan mans the trawler with a look of somber resolution. He doesn't flinch at the stench. By now, the reek should not faze Caleb either; it envelopes every waking moment of his life. Yet, in these three long years since it all began, he still grimaces—permanently. There are no seabirds that hungrily trail the men's trawler. No dolphins dance along their route. Not even the familiar scent of fish can be found anymore. Only the repugnant stench of life bygone and the uncanny miasma of things made by men. Caleb decides to settle down. Lobstering now requires little bait preparation. Caleb still hasn't gotten used to the sight of the synthetic chunks, but he knows he has little choice. The man is only thirty-three, yet anyone could easily mistake him for a decade older. Crows' feet line his face and deep ridges stretch across his forehead—testaments to many rough voyages at sea. He pulls his yellow rain

jacket tighter and makes his way below deck. There are still a few hours ahead of the men. Today they venture farther than they have before. Farther than their forefathers.

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“Set her!” Duncan shouts from the wheelhouse.

Caleb shoves a yellow-coated wire trap over the rail. It lands with a splash and rapidly descends as the ocean grabs hold, the warp hissing in pursuit.

“Keep that warp straight!” Duncan’s voice roars over the howling wind.

Caleb watches the line run clean, clearing a loop with his boot as the pot plummets deeper and deeper. The rope keeps paying out, still not coming under any semblance of tension, farther than he expected, farther than it ought. One-hundred fathoms gone. Two. Still no weight. There is seemingly no bottom.

Though the men had begun setting pots this way months prior, after inshore grounds had thinned and the charts showed promise in deeper water, it still felt wrong to him—not wrong like a moral breach, but something older that dwelt outside of living memory. The spikes had been added when traps first began to vanish in the deep grounds. Some claimed they would grip the shifting bottom, though most came back half-buried all the same. Duncan never trusted them, but he was a man of routine and never bothered to try a new method. The image of the pots never ceased to bother Caleb. They felt like modern teeth sinking deep into something that settled long ago, something that is meant to stay settled.

The warp keeps running. Two-fifty. Near three-hundred fathoms now. Too much line. The sea gives nothing back. Not resistance, not life, not even the dull confirmation of bottom. Only depth.

At last, Duncan shouts for the buoy.

Caleb heaves it over. The green and orange paint vanishes into the gray as the line continues to pay out beneath it.

“Marking it at forty-two thirty-two north...sixty-nine eighteen west.” Even though he marked the location in the GPS software, Duncan still liked saying the coordinates aloud. “It’s the old salt in me, boy,” he would say with a wry, tobacco-stained grin.

Caleb leans over the rail, eyeing the blackness before him. As he stares at one place, the sea seems to yawn beneath him—giving way to a void below, where Caleb can see for hundreds of feet. A sudden rush of inadequacy engulfs him and he trembles, shaking his head in the process and rubbing his eyes. He looks away for a moment; when he returns his gaze, the chasm is replaced by stagnant sea.

“Start the next one, Caleb!”

Caleb quickly turns to the stack behind him. Grabbing the next pot by its top crossbar, he pivots it toward the rail and carefully maneuvers the pot so as not to be impaled by the spikes. After attaching the warp line, Caleb heaves the trap over the rail with one swift shove. As it pays out, he mans the warp, and the cycle repeats. However, this time the rope suddenly goes limp in his grip; he drops it in alarm. As soon as Caleb lets go, the line snaps taut and resumes its rapid descent. He instinctively grabs it—wet, fibrous heat eagerly tears into him. The meat of his hands proves useless as flesh gives way to cord. Skin peels from palms. Caleb screams in agony as hot blood coats his forearms.

“What the hell are you doing, boy?” Duncan roars. But the anger in his voice melts into fear when he notices Caleb’s hands. The buoy finally whips over the side, narrowly missing Caleb’s face as it’s inhaled by the depths.

“I...I couldn’t stop it,” he stammers. “It felt hot beyond friction. Like it was pulled from below.”

“Get yourself cleaned up. Don’t worry about the trap.”

Caleb stumbles his way below deck to the kitchen area where the medical supplies are. Dousing his hands in rubbing alcohol, he winces, holding back tears. Blood mixed with antiseptic drips on the sink, glossily glinting under a swaying cabin light. He wraps his hands in white linen and tapes them in strips of duct tape, finishing the process with a pair of thick rubber gloves.

Caleb ascends to the upper deck and is met with Duncan’s troubled expression. Duncan shifts uncomfortably at the helm, as wrinkles of worry line his sun-kissed brow.

“I don’t like it, kid.” He shakes his head slowly. “Something strange down there today. Old men used to talk about grounds where the sea keeps what you give it. My father said he ventured near this way once.” He runs his gnarled fingers through his wiry white hair. “Said he turned back before he set, but wouldn’t tell me why. Not sure I want to keep this up.”

Caleb desperately wishes to turn back, but he knows what he would be risking—the health of three young children and a young wife at home. Their faces appear in warm tones within his mind’s eye. He pictures his wife, Jocelyn, heavy with their fourth; though she had endured his countless voyages, he knew she could not help but worry every time. Her big, brown eyes—always a little misty on each eve before a voyage—filled him with a sense of longing, but mostly duty. Little Jonah was about to be five, his eldest. Caleb had promised the child a yellow bakery cake for his birthday next week.

Caleb sighs. His worn face hardens in resolve.

“We can’t go home yet, Duncan.” He exclaims in a tone of unfamiliar sternness. “I can’t afford to.”

“Can you still man the warp?” Duncan eyes Caleb’s gloved hands.

“Don’t worry about me. Where is our next spot?”

“Just up the way. Hold tight.” Duncan furrows his brow and pushes the throttle forward.

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“Depth finder’s busted!” Duncan swats the screen with the heel of his palm. “Damn thing worked this morning.” The screen reads fifty-feet, but they’re in open water—an impossible reading. Caleb looks out at the horizon as Duncan continues to smack the screen. The hum of the motor sounds different, like the sea is swallowing the vibrations; it’s more muffled.

And then the men feel it.

A pulse beneath their boots.

A second throb follows, but deeper and more deliberate. Caleb grabs hold of the rail to steady himself. The deck lifts beneath them like the shifting chest of a sleeping behemoth.

Duncan looks back at Caleb from the wheelhouse, wide-eyed. “Did you feel that?”

Before Caleb has time to answer, a deep, encompassing tremble emits from below. The sound is low and mournful, yet fractured, like stone cracking somewhere in the dark. They feel it reverberate in their rib cages as it drowns out the motor. Duncan, tripping over himself in his haste, meets Caleb’s frightened gaze with a look of terror. The old captain slams the throttle into neutral.

“That ain’t a swell. The sea don’t move like that, even when it was alive.”

The men, brimming with morbid curiosity, peer over the rail. They strain their eyes in hopes of gazing through the inky blueness, but are met with glassy quietude, as if the ocean is holding its breath. Caleb notices a dull pressure in his skull that wasn't there previously.

Then, he spots them.

Dozens of amorphous black masses floating just under the water's surface and nearly as large as the trawler. They hang ominously, and Caleb can't help but picture World War II-era naval mines. Duncan eases the trawler alongside for a closer look. Caleb quickly realizes the things are not metal, but flesh. One's body has split along its underside, exposing a pale interior forced outward as though the pressure of its ascent tore it open. Another drifts slightly and faces him. Caleb gasps. Misshapen mounds bulge along its sides, capped by jutting, pearl-like spheres. Not alive, but as the men squint for a closer inspection, they feel its gaze pass through them. Beneath, a crooked, melting line that opens to hundreds of jagged, knife-like spikes that contrast its bulbous frame. Too numerous to be teeth, yet made to tear and maim. There are more of the things than Caleb originally thought, at least twenty. They hover, unmoving. Open. Ruptured. Undone by the world above.

"I've seen enough, boy. We're going home." Duncan says as he half jogs to the helm, tripping over a lifejacket in the process.

Caleb doesn't protest this time. He feels as though something was emancipated from within him—a lingering agitation rising from the unnamed depths of his mind. His very presence feels incongruous with this present moment. The unease creeps from the base of his neck, down his arms and through his fingers. He cannot steady them.

“Damn it!” Duncan snarls from the wheelhouse. “Go!” He slams the throttle down repeatedly, but the trawler suspends as the motor hums timidly. Caleb notices movement in his peripheral vision and turns his head reflexively toward it.

A jolt of polar air coils around his spine.

The things are moving.

Congealed, black flesh twitching just under the surface. A splayed, white opening quivers as soft, sickly squelching assails his eardrums. The creatures move in unison—unnaturally bobbing and rolling away from the trawler toward something in the distance.

There, beyond the bow is a growing blackness beneath the static sea. The things encircle it with a fervor like obedience. The shadow is darker than pitch, displacing all traces of light as it unfurls outwards. When it reaches the creatures, they cease to be visible.

It is only a few yards away from the men now, growing in all directions.

“I can’t spark her, Caleb!” Duncan yowls as he wrenches the throttle with his full weight.

The shadow is beneath them now. It rises, and the men feel the bow break from the water, then the stern. Hoisted by a swelling force below, they begin to quickly ascend, and Caleb clings to the rail in panicked desperation. Five feet. Then ten.

Suddenly, the watery floor gives way, as a sound like boulders struck by lightning booms from the depths. Dropping swiftly, Caleb witnesses a depression forming below the ship. The trawler lurches forward, dragged not downward, but inward. The bow dips into the gaping hollow, water cascading past the rails. The stern lifts as if the ocean itself has grabbed the boat by its tail, pulling them further into the void that swallows ocean and light alike. “We’re getting sucked in, boy!” Duncan’s eyes flair with a blaze of understood despair.

As they descend into the gaping chasm, ocean walls climb in unison around them. For a moment as they sink, the boat is seated in a hollow cathedral of roaring sea, as if something colossal displaced an unbelievable amount of water beneath.

Over the roar of rushing water, Duncan cries out to God to rescue them.

For a split second, Caleb focuses on a single spot in front of him. Pale, lifeless eyes pierce through him, peering through the screen of rushing water. Below them, a slack, aperture hangs half-formed in the dark. A milk-white, larval mass spills loosely across a forest of jagged spikes. He shudders so deeply that he loses his footing and stumbles backwards.

His head cracks upon the falling deck.

Then everything merges as the ocean comes crashing in from every direction. The boat is pushed upside down. Pressure and rushing water build all around him as the last ray of light is snuffed out.

He opens his eyes to the purest darkness—a void so black, his own thoughts become inky in confusion. The first thing Caleb notices is his inability to breathe. Weight presses upon every inch of him. He tries to move his arm, but feels an unfamiliar resistance. His arm is fixed in place. He tries the other—stuck. To his horror, he cannot move his head. Panic sets in as his lungs begin to burn. Again, he feels a pressure in his skull, sharper this time.

In an instant, his panic gives way to unfathomable dread. An earth-trembling, cavernous vibration resounds rhythmically. It carries a pulse like a heartbeat that is too vast to trace, each pulse echoing for miles.

It comes from something alive. Something that saw the world form when all was ocean.

The water thickens around him, forcing its way into his open mouth. The taste is metallic, almost bloody.

His lungs squeeze in silent agony.

The colossal thump continues.

Through the haze of panic, he sees the darkness shift. It passes from left to right—larger than life—as if something has extended between him and existence itself. Darker than the absence of light, its size bends perception and crushes comprehension. Caleb's stomach churns as if the depths have turned him inside out. Thoughts collapse like the imploding basin that brought him here. Vision fractures. His temples feel like they will explode with each passing thunderous pulse. His bloodshot eyes roll back into his skull as the abyss inhales him. Time and space blur until he can no longer find himself.

The pulse ceases to echo around him.

It resounds through him.

Caleb can no longer find where he ends and it begins. His ego melts into the undulating mass before him. He is a conduit for something alive, something eternal, something that breathed its first breaths when the earth was all ocean. There is no Caleb.

There is only that which lies below.