

GINA WERFEL

Tumble, 2017
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in



COURTESY PRINCE STREET GALLERY, NYC
AND MIKE TRASK PHOTOGRAPHER

WOODY SKINNER Atlantic Blue

Celia's Aunt Lucille insisted on delivering the gift a week before the baby shower—she said that would keep our cousins from getting jealous. And so, on an otherwise quiet Saturday, we arranged for Lucille to come over.

Before she arrived I sat restlessly in the living room as Celia tidied up around me. There were little knots on her temples, her head pregnant with thought.

I asked what she was thinking about.

"I'm wondering if I should have gone to medical school," she said.

Sometimes it was medical school, other times law. "The studio's doing fine," I said. "We're doing fine."

"I don't want to take portraits forever," she said.

Without a knock, Aunt Lucille came through the door. Her arms cradled a neatly wrapped gift.

I punched off the television, and Celia hugged her aunt around the gift.

"I hardly notice your belly," said Aunt Lucille. She's one of those family members who speaks in accusations—maybe Celia was faking the pregnancy for unsolicited gifts.

"I promise it's there," Celia said, as politely as she could.

I took the gift from Lucille—heavier than it looked—and hugged her with my free arm. She smelled like vegetable soup, bland but warm. Ever since Harold had passed, she'd been giving more robust hugs, muscled clasps that lasted, somehow, after she let go.

The three of us settled in the living room, and I held on to the gift. The wrapping paper was immaculate, crisp lines and sharp corners, its perfection unnerving. My own family had a history of wrapping gifts in scraps of newspaper or inside the knotted plastic of supermarket bags. This formal package, the stiffness in Aunt Lucille's shoulders—I could hardly bear them.

I passed the gift to Celia, my hands fumbling, somehow, in the easy exchange. She unthreaded the ribbon with wonderful grace, her thin fingers precise as a pair of Fiskars. And the paper—how she plucked it open and then folded it over, like a seamstress handling fine fabrics. What remained was a box of simple white cardboard, the kind you might find undershirts wrapped in.

She flipped open the flaps and lifted out a delicate contraption. It was a baby mobile, its tin pieces shaped

and painted to look like birds in flight—ducks and cranes and pelicans.

“It was your grandfather’s,” Lucille said. “I’ve finally accepted that Blair isn’t going to have any kids.”

Celia studied the mobile with a certain grave appreciation. “The colors are fantastic,” she said.

“It’s hand-painted,” Lucille said. “All original.”

I tried to imagine Celia’s brawny, bigoted grandfather ever lying beneath such a dainty apparatus.

“It’s a beautiful piece,” I said, and it was—but even then the mobile felt like an omen, like it had significance I couldn’t understand.

* * *

Celia’s ultrasound was a few weeks later. She lay on the hospital bed and I sat beside her, swiping through photos from our morning shoot with the Silver Sneakers, a geriatric aerobics troupe. Celia’s shots were off again—the grins raw-gummed and denture-glinted. During art school, she’d been the best in our class, but she’d grown tired of the business—tired of the chalky lighting, the sleep-starved mothers in wrinkled blouses, the work-stricken fathers with unkempt beards.

I, on the other hand, was born for sad subject matter. My photos made the Silver Sneakers look a dozen years younger. I caught them with their widest smiles, just before cheeks flared into wrinkles, their bulbous hairdos casting stark silhouettes.

Our photo viewing was interrupted when a skinny woman in baggy scrubs entered the room. She introduced herself as the radiology tech and, without saying more, smeared jelly over the small lump of Celia’s stomach, the skin stretched to translucence, veins purpling beneath the surface. The woman rubbed the transducer in circles, pressing against the upturned bowl that was our baby’s home. Every once in a while she’d stop to examine the screen, her thin body tensing, face shining in the gray light of the monitor.

After a minute-long silence, she said, “Your baby is a fish.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

She turned the monitor toward us. A tiny shape was floating in the silver glow of the screen. I could see the arched hump of a dorsal fin, the prominent bulge of eyes. It looked like a minnow.

“Is it healthy?” Celia asked.

She’d heard the tech, she was looking at the same monitor I was, and this was the first thing she’d said.

“I don’t know very much about fish,” said the tech.

She called in a doctor. Within a few hours the doctor had called in a biologist and a pet store owner. Everyone gathered around the screen, studying it quietly. Finally the pet store owner announced that our fish was female.

The biologist confirmed this assessment. The doctor nodded in a distracted way.

“Is this fairly common?” I asked, uncertain about whom to address. And then, for fear my question hadn’t been understood: “A fish daughter, I mean?”

Celia squeezed my tricep, her preferred manner of indicating that I’d committed a faux pas obvious enough to recognize on my own.

“It’s hard to say,” the biologist said. “Inconsistent reporting.”

“I think I remember reading a case study in medical school,” the doctor said.

All three of them—the doctor, the biologist, the pet store owner—agreed that Celia had developed a suitable habitat, a body of water in which our daughter was thriving.

“I wouldn’t spend time around any hungry cats,” the pet store owner said.

We laughed, but his face remained sober, his eyes wet like he was allergic to something.

* * *

Celia and I had always reacted to the world’s absurdity with a kind of deadpan stare, as though we were somehow separate from it, as though we were safe. There was, it seemed, a security in our stoicism, in the way we pretended that nothing—not even a fish pregnancy—could disturb our perfectly pleasant lives.

Wasn’t that precisely how we’d ended up with a portrait studio inside a big-box retailer? A novel idea, during those listless days after art school, that neither of us was willing to rule out. Neither of us willing to admit we’d be bothered by the ugly commercial setting, by snapping photos of grimacing, third-shift lives. Would we ever have done it if we hadn’t thought that somehow—with our middle-class upbringings, our overpriced educations—we were above it all? More than plain snobbery or pretension—this

was an aesthetic conviction. A sensibility, developed and deployed to steel us against ugliness and pain.

And it is striking, as I look back, how quickly our convictions turned into everyday truths. Once the novelty thinned, we were two people taking portraits for a living. Six years passed, and we were still shooting photos for customers to send to distant relatives.

So when we learned that our daughter was a fish, we reacted in our usual manner. We practiced aggressive indifference, even as I accompanied Celia to biweekly appointments with a team of medical and marine professionals, even as they prodded her stomach, guessed at the gestation period, speculated about the species.

Perhaps our sincerest acknowledgement of the circumstances occurred when, during one of our regular trips for ice cream, I suggested our fish was a species sought by anglers of the rougher sort, by rednecks.

Celia drew her face into a look of disgust.

“Would you still love her if she were a largemouth?” I asked.

“I grew up in Alabama,” she said. “They were on everyone’s wall. People caught them on TV.”

We maintained these poker faces even as the pregnancy progressed. One afternoon during the hot middle of July, Celia and I decided to cook out. She sat in the shade of a flimsy awning, drinking tall glasses of ice water from a sweat-specked pitcher. I stood beside her, arranging charcoal briquettes with the patience, the skill, of an architect.

“Can’t you just light it?” Celia asked. “I’m really hungry.”

“The pyramid is everything when it comes to maximizing flame exposure,” I said.

Once I had the fire going, I turned to the business of seasoning the steaks but noticed the salt was missing. Celia was pouring the canister of Morton into the pitcher of water. I said nothing, just watched as the stream of salt thinned, the water clouding beneath it.

Celia lobbed the empty canister into the trash can. Then she poured a glass, stirred with her finger, and chugged it in a single swallow. Afterward, she gagged, her cheeks expanding, before she swallowed again.

“Now the steaks will be underseasoned,” I said. Then, “Are you all right?”

Her face sharpened into a cruel smile. She poured another glass and knocked it back with barroom bravado.

* * *

When I went to bed that night Celia was asleep. I eased onto the mattress and scooted toward the warmth of her body. I closed my eyes and placed my hand on her stomach. It was small as a coconut, a knot with sloshing liquid inside. I let my fingers stretch over the skin, pressing firmly but carefully. I could feel the faint buzzing of our daughter’s fins, her fluttering body suspended inside. And Celia, too. I could feel her heart pumping, pushing fluid, every beat the crest of a tiny wave. I could feel, as I lay there awake and alone, the strangeness of it all. Her swollen stomach, the fish swimming around inside of her—these facts seemed too wonderful and perilous to ever be true.

* * *

Her thirst for salt aside, Celia was inscrutable as ever. She complained about her work at the studio even as she gracefully served our customers. She washed pickles down with glasses of milk. She watched recorded soap operas and commented on the lighting in every shot. *Where did this light designer study? The funeral home? Did that actor have plastic surgery or has he been embalmed?*

I’d started researching aquariums. I read online reviews from fish owners around the globe. Most people, it seemed, felt only outrage about the containers to which they’d entrusted their fish. There were horror stories of tanks with poor centers of gravity, tanks tipping over in the night, tanks built of substandard glass by underpaid and undertrained children in the far reaches of the world. Cracks streaking through their walls, water seeping from their sides. People waking to find carcasses at the bottom of dry cases, air thick with briny decay.

One evening, when we were about to close up the portrait studio, I told Celia about one of the tragic Amazon reviews I’d read earlier that day. “This woman in Hong Kong, she lost a whole school of tiger fish.”

Celia was on the computer, editing photos we’d shot that morning. Another suburban family.

“I think we should build our aquarium,” I said.

She was zoomed in tight on a photo, the baby’s head slackened onto its mother’s bosom, its mouth open. “Have you ever noticed that babies are shaped like spider egg sacs?”

She was onto something. Viewed so closely, the baby had that unsettling, grotesque quality of nature in progress—something an unruly child might prod with a stick.

“If we build the tank we’ll know it’s made well,” I said.

“What about the tank at my parents’ house?” Celia asked.

“That thing belongs in a middle school classroom—low-grade glass, questionable structural integrity, a tacky background.”

She returned her attention to the computer screen; she began airbrushing the father’s razor burn. “I’m not sure we can afford to build one,” she said. “It would probably cost as much as our house.”

“We’d actually save a lot building it ourselves,” I said.

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life in this studio?” she asked.

“We’re going to be parents,” I said.

Celia’s mouth pulled sideways, her left cheek dimpling—it was a face she often made. Back then I interpreted the expression as annoyance, but now I believe it was something closer to pity.

* * *

There were moments, of course, when our feelings surfaced before darting away. Like the day we learned our daughter’s species and, as a kind of celebration, went to the zoo. It was miserable weather for zoo going, the air bristly with cold drizzle. I bought an umbrella emblazoned with the image of an elephant, the handle shaped like a trunk.

We had the place to ourselves, the sidewalks empty as we strolled past polar bears and sea lions, jaguars and apes. At the end of a cave-like hallway flush with the scent of fish, we entered a viewing room. There we stood in the dank shadows below an enormous window, a soft light shining down from the surface of the water, daylight refracted into scattered rays. Most of the fish were big, listless bodies hanging in the cloudy tank. Every so often a school of small fish swirled past in a kaleidoscopic bloom.

“There’s supposed to be a Spanish mackerel in here,” I said.

“It might be hard to tell,” Celia said. “They’re sort of plain looking.”

A woman entered the viewing room, stopping at the edge of the tank. I continued to search for a mackerel as

the woman slowly worked her way toward us. When she was standing next to me she whispered, “Look at all the fishies swimming around.”

“Yes,” I said, “Aren’t they something?” But then I saw the little boy, a toddler, standing at her legs, his arms extended up to her hands. He had an unnatural, cleaned-up look, like the kids who came into the studio for portraits.

The woman smiled at me, then pulled him past us to the other end of the tank.

“You keep looking for the fish,” Celia said. “I’m going to the concession stand.”

“You don’t want to see it?” I asked.

“We’ve seen the pictures already,” she said.

“I thought you’d be more excited,” I said.

“I’m exhausted,” she said. “And to be honest, I’m a little tired of fish—we’ve talked about them all day.”

“I’m trying to prepare,” I said.

“You’re excited to get a pet,” she said.

We were silent, facing the aquarium, the truth of her words trickling into us. Before us the water quivered with the quiet gestures of all those fins.

* * *

I moved forward on our aquarium, measuring the nursery, taping dimension markers to the floor. The tank would take up most of the room, with just enough space left over for us to maneuver, sit, observe. I ordered the finest materials—reinforced steel, tempered fiberglass, a zoo-quality aerator and drainage system—and we made arrangements for a team of contractors to install the plumbing.

I handled more and more of the work at the studio, to ensure that Celia got plenty of rest. During slow hours I’d thumb through the textbooks Celia’s biologist loaned us. The world’s waters were full of dangers, it seemed. There were the obvious threats—fishermen and predators and oil spills—but there were quiet killers too: diseases and poisonous plants and chemical exposure.

After reading a few pages, I’d feel an ignorance so acute that it blurred my vision, the words clumping into a monolithic bulk, aloof as a mountaintop against the horizon. My gaze would lift from the textbook and settle on the over-lit aisles of PriceNipper, and I’d end up thinking about those months after I first met Celia. How I’d carried around a heaviness of feeling not unlike the exhilaration

before taking a photograph. How we’d lived in that feeling, Celia and I, piecing our lives together inside of it like we were constructing a set. Like we were holding different poses. And for so many months—so many years—I’d braced myself, afraid of the clack of the lens, afraid of the dissipation that follows.

How long had it been since I’d felt that heady mixture of excitement and fear? How long had it been since I’d had something I was afraid to lose? During those slow days, alone at the studio, I tried to identify the precise moment when faked apathy became real boredom. Maybe during one of our infrequent arguments, when we’d hurled pent-up feelings at one another, words like fists, our voices violent. Or maybe after we’d talked ourselves out of selling the portrait studio, after we’d postponed Celia’s idea to take our savings and find work in another city.

Or more likely it was a quiet event that passed quickly—one of those moments of obscure significance that dangles knifelike in memory. Perhaps it was that night, just after we’d closed up the studio, when I was cleaning my camera. As my eye settled over the viewfinder, a single breast came into focus. Resting in the V of Celia’s sweater, the breast stared at me with a bearing that could only be described as puckish, the nipples equivalent of a shit-eating grin. I instinctively snapped a photo.

Sometimes, as I’m sorting through my personal shots, I come across that image. It seems straightforward enough—Celia’s delighted expression, her pleasure in disrupting the wholesome studio—but sometimes the camera reduces rather than apprehends; sometimes a photograph warms mystery until it looks like nostalgia. When I’d taken that photo of Celia, the room was trembling with a disgruntled energy the camera didn’t capture.

* * *

I woke up at sunrise one Saturday and went to the nursery, determined to construct the aquarium. My supplies were stacked neatly in the center of the room, my tool belt draped over them. I was arranging the base, placing the beams over the markers, when I sensed something above me. The mobile—it hung in the middle of the room, painted birds wincing in sleepy light. The arrangement of its pieces suggested an obscure order. Like the skeleton of some long-dead creature, pieced back together—the

small-boned obsession of a minor archaeologist.

I decided to work around it, beneath it, until Celia and I could discuss its placement. All morning my hands fumbled over tools, scattering parts. But before long I settled into a rhythm, my grip steadying, the wrench turning truer.

I’d been working on the aquarium for a few hours when I glanced over to find Celia standing in the doorway.

“You’re up earlier than I expected,” I said.

“And you’re further along than I expected,” she said.

For a long moment we stared at each other in silence.

“You don’t have to stop,” she said.

I finished tightening a bolt.

“You like my addition?” she asked.

“It’s an interesting mobile,” I said, “but it’ll be a bit crowded in here.”

“It’s bigger than I expected,” she said.

“How’d you hang it?” I asked.

She smiled—not her usual wry semismile, but the full spread, a whole octave of piano keys. That smile cut into my chest, my body recognizing how long it had been since she’d looked that happy. The mobile seemed to be communicating something neither of us could say.

She headed down the hall without a word and I continued to work. I was securing the last wall, closing myself into the fiberglass rectangle, when she returned with a handful of paint swatches. She flipped through them, stopping every once in a while to get my opinion.

“I like this one,” she said, pressing a blue color against the fiberglass.

“I like it, too,” I said. “What’s it called?”

“Atlantic Blue.”

* * *

It happened before we were ready. I’d gone inside the grocery store to get Celia some yogurt while she waited in the car. When I came back, she was reclining. I climbed in quietly to avoid disturbing her. I had already started the engine when she said, “My saltwater just broke.”

She said it calmly, the punch line to a joke she’d waited months to deliver.

“Do you feel her flopping?” I asked.

She rolled down her window, the car thick with brine.

“Is there any water left in there?”

She told me to shut up, to get us to the hospital. So

that's what I did; it was only a couple of miles away. I sped along the interstate, my eyes darting from mirror to mirror as I changed lanes and zoomed through the traffic. Celia lay there in the seat, her hand on her forehead, breathing in time with the soft music of the radio, a pleading fifties song.

Ten minutes later we were rushed to the maternity floor, where Celia settled into a birthing pool and delivered a fish the size of a rolled-up Sunday newspaper—two pounds, three ounces. They gave us a private room, placing our daughter in a tank beside Celia's bed. Lying there in her hospital gown, Celia looked like she'd been lost at sea, her skin all wrinkled from the prolonged submersion, her hair damp and curly.

Our daughter's scales had a bluish hue, yellow dots along the side, slender fins waving in the water.

"I was worried she might have bulging eyeballs," Celia said. "But they haven't grown since the ultrasound."

"I think she has my lips," I said. "Not as full as yours."

"Her name is Lily," Celia said. "I always wanted a Lily."

The next morning, after her birth certificate had been marked with her tailfin print, we strapped Lily's portable aquarium into the car. It was supposed to be splash-proof, but I drove home with my foot kissing the brake pedal, the water sloshing with every turn we made.

* * *

Lily waited patiently in her portable tank while we finished preparing the nursery. We spent the morning installing red mangroves, filling the aquarium with salt water, and stocking a variety of smaller fish. Once everything was ready, we prepared to transition Lily to her new home.

I was about to reach into the portable tank when Celia stopped me.

"You forgot to put these on," she said, passing me the gloves we'd purchased—they were designed to prevent the oils of our palms from harming her scales.

The rubber chirped as I pulled the gloves tight. When I reached inside the tank, Lily darted from my fingers.

"She's terrified," I said.

"I would be too," Celia said.

I cupped my hand under her belly, gripped behind the pectoral fins. Then I lifted her from the bowl and lowered her over the chest-high wall of the aquarium. She was still

for a moment but then, with a flip of her tail, splashed down into the water. She stopped by the aerator, bubbles fluttering around her.

"Should we get the camera?" I asked.

"Not right now," Celia said. "Let's just watch."

We sat on the floor, leaned our backs against the wall. We watched in silence as she mingled with other fish, as she ate her first sand perch, as she flashed around the tank, absorbed by the world we'd created for her.

"It's missing something," Celia said.

"We followed all the installation instructions," I said.

"The tank just looks naked. Sort of institutional."

"The decor is a bit modern," I said.

A minute later, my eyes drifted up to the mobile. It was hanging there above us, insistent as an idea, fully formed, waiting to be acknowledged.

I used the step stool to unhook it from the ceiling and then I latched it to the cross beam at the top of the aquarium. I dropped the mobile into the water, letting its pieces sink into place.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I'm not sure Aunt Lucille would approve," she said. "But Lily seems to love it."

Lily flitted around and between the mobile, the tin birds dancing in her current.

* * *

We spent that first day moving distractedly about the house. For a while Celia carried the baby monitor, listening to the sound of the aquarium, but she turned it off to watch her recorded soap operas. I kept finding myself back in the nursery, checking the water level, the temperature, the salinity. I wanted to have something to *do*, but already one thing seemed clear: it would be painfully easy to raise a fish.

Late in the afternoon, I decided to move a love seat from our office into the nursery. Celia and I brought our cameras into the room, but instead of taking pictures we sat there drinking coffee beside Lily, who lingered in the corner closest to us. With the aerator mumbling hypnotically, I experienced a softening of my consciousness. The room wobbling with late afternoon light, air thick as liquid—it seemed like Lily, Celia, and I were sharing a container, our house its own kind of tank. And I could feel, beyond our

house, a whole planet stacked with habitats, a big world made of little worlds. The three of us suspended there in our small compartment of time and space, hoping in some unconscious way that all of it—everything—would hold together for a few moments longer. That the pressurized walls of the aquarium would withstand . . . That water would keep pumping through the city's rusted pipes. That gravity would continue to steady our poses.

As afternoon shaded into evening, the sun dragged its light from the room. The salty air had expanded my lungs, filling them with heavy oxygen. I was beginning to feel sleepy.

That's when Celia asked, "What are those little red fish?"

At first I didn't understand, but then I noticed a spark of red toward the back of the aquarium. I looked closer and saw other colors, too—yellow and blue, orange and green. I approached the tank, turned on its floor light.

A liquid galaxy appeared, a constellation of paint flakes surrounding the mobile's pieces, silver clouding over the light. Lily hung in the middle, moonlike.

For a moment, we couldn't understand what we were seeing. We didn't recognize the slivers of paint. And we couldn't anticipate the chemical exposure, the long weeks of testing and treatment, the biologist's endless visits.

In that moment, what Celia and I shared was not panic but something like wonder.

I raised my camera and stilled my eye behind it.

Woody Skinner is the author of the short story collection *A Thousand Distant Radios*, appearing November 2017 from Atelier26 Books. His work has won the Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award and appeared in *Mid-American Review*, the *Carolina Quarterly*, *Hobart*, *Booth*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and elsewhere. Originally from Batesville, Arkansas, Skinner currently lives in Chicago. Visit www.woodyskinner.com.