

Fourteen Adaptations of the Female Ceratioid

Let us begin with your lure, with the way that its light beckons come closer.

With your name, angler, meaning to fish for fish. You must unstitch yourself at all your creases. You must fold your limbs inward, so that you are only a body. You must take your time growing spines out of the flesh of your back. And the deepening pressure. And the growing cold. Yes, it will be cold. You can feel the points of your teeth stirring in your gums. They will grow outward, needlelike, and longer than you can imagine. Perhaps there will be pride in them. In the way that they jut inward so that a small fish might swim, unharmed, past them and into your wide mouth. In the way that the small fish, upon realizing it will be swallowed, might swim backwards in a panic, only to find that it has been pierced on their sharpness. Its fins will drift like fine lace as it dies. You must remember that you will not be able to see. It will be blacker than black, and though you retain eyes, they will be useless at this depth.

Of the Teleost order Lophiiformes, the anglerfish is a bony fish discovered first in the 19th century. One might say that it is the stuff of our land-dwelling nightmares. Darwin surmised that the more extreme the environment, the stranger the adaptations needed to survive. When first found, they were called sea devils. Occasionally, ceratiidae, for unknown reasons will venture to the surface, and when one considers this fact it is not hard to imagine how the drawings in early bestiaries, all slime and mouth and teeth, might not be exaggerated, but rather an attempt to capture a creature as long as a man's torso, with a mouth so wide that when opened fully the animal appears gutted. Its teeth as long as fingers. An animal that appears grey, or sludge brown, or striped with plumes, like milk in coffee. An animal with an arcing organ between its rosebud eyes that seems a mistake, given our preference for symmetry. We would need to venture to the deep to learn that small organ glowed.

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We would need to venture to the deep to learn that small organ glowed. Perhaps, in the same way, we do not tease out the finer points of our identity until we are faced with the scenarios we do not prepare for: the young rabbit, back legs caught and ruined by tire on a backroad, the man who calls you beautiful as he forces his hands into your jeans, your mother mouthing the word melanoma over and over. In each case it is as though you have sunk to the bottom of a dive well and someone is screaming your name from twelve feet up. Though I know that evolution is slow, there is something in the ugliness of certain animals, the terror of their instinct, that explains some things I now know about myself, about others. I hold these truths close to my chest, both hiding and cradling them. I saw the rabbit struggling. I asked my boyfriend for the knife in his pocket, and the flesh was pulpy with gravel and blood, and the heart knocked against the ribcage, soft and frantic.

Until 1924 the only known specimens of ceratioid to be collected and dissected were female. How lovely to be a thing so ugly. To be so misunderstood and frightening, as to be flayed open, pinned to a tray, each organ cataloged and weighed. I want to tell those creatures floating in formaldehyde that the hideous is only too much beauty. I know a person who does not like me purely because of the way that I look. Because my skin is pale, and my eyes are dark, and my hair is a particular shade of red. And I know that beauty is a gift, but what I want is to become as the anglerfish became. I want to see my beauty twisted by the extremes of circumstance. Still Kingdom: Animalia, Phylum: Chordata, but the architecture of my head flattened dorsoventrally by pressure. My smile gaping far too wide, nearly the circumference of my skull. Too many teeth, each hair filament contorted, fused into the esca, with which I will lure both prey and males. And who is to say there is a difference?

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I will lure both prey and males. And who is to say there is a difference? Thinks the lonely anglerfish in her world of darkness, where she does not see another living being for days at a time. With such scarcity, she has developed, and swelled, and shrank, and begun to house colonies of bioluminescent bacteria in her arcing esca. In the dark, she moves by smell, the bacteria flash pinpricks of light. If she is lucky, perhaps there is a lanternfish in the distance, blinking a hopeful Morse code, which she cannot read. A fish, a shrimp, another small creature, draws close to inspect her light. Strange to think that the other creature is sometimes the male she seeks. He swims, guided by smell, searching for a particular female pheromone feathering the saltwater. When he finds it, he swims towards her brightness, but unlike the others, he eats a hole into her side. How strange to think, then, that the first dissections of anglerfish incorrectly noted the small males that dotted her body as her offspring.

Synonyms for instinct: urge, drive, need. The need of the male anglerfish: to eat through a thick, gelatinous membrane, through flesh, through muscle. What can we know, not only of this initial instinct to consume, but also of what keeps him burrowed in her, until her blood vessels grow into his own? Once nourished by her blood, the male, several magnitudes smaller than the female, begins to atrophy. He no longer needs eyes, a mouth. He is there only to ensure her fecundity. Though we cannot imagine ourselves eating our way into our partners, our comparably neat rituals of courtship are not entirely devoid of this instinct. When I was 16 my mother took me to shop for a prom dress, she shadowed green silk against my black t-shirt and jeans, she draped me in chiffon, twisted my long hair tight with a silver comb. In the dressing room, through hand-stitched lace, I tried to hide a map of blooming purple, left by someone who loved with sharpness, with teeth.

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Blooming purple, left by someone who loved with sharpness, with teeth, spread across my forearm the day after I was pushed so hard it was as though I flew into the wall behind me. I still dissect the moments leading up to the push that fractured my radius and ulna. I weigh my choices like a scientist, searching for empirical truth. I think about the quickness of rage. I multiply by the force needed to shatter bone. I divide by every small kindness, every tenderness. Like the scientists who could not find the male anglerfish, I have performed hundreds of dissections of the female, but I will not understand the ritual of mating violence until I, at last, discover the atrophied male, open him, see what his instinct has made of him. Here is the fact I cradle now: the moment before my body falling, before the splintering of bone, was an unwanted kiss. A kiss met with hands that shoved his body away from mine, saying no, rejecting him with their resistance, which then made him push back.

Freud calls the male experience of viewing the female genitals a “terrifying shock of threatened castration.” Joseph Campbell coined the “phallic mother” the long-fingered and long-nosed witch. There is also the motif of the toothed vagina, which castrates. Ash to Ripley, You still don’t understand what you’re dealing with, do you? Perfect organism. The naturalist Charles Tate Regan writes of the male anglerfish, “The male ceratioid is merely an appendage of the female, and entirely dependent on her for nutrition.” I am seven, peering into the darkness of a pressurized tank at the Baltimore Aquarium, the flickering specks of light remind me of searching for shooting stars in the summer with my sister. There, she says, pointing up. My father hits a button. Red light fills the room. The fish are huddled together in the corner of the tank. I am not afraid of them, instead I am afraid because they appear afraid, but people start to cry out in disgust, What is that thing on its head? Its teeth! Collective gasp.

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Cry out in disgust, What is that thing on its head? Its teeth! Collective gasp— human reactions to the abject. Kristeva writes, “Abjection is immoral, sinister, scheming, shady: a terror that disassembles.” The horror is in the Anglerfishes’ escape, in the appearance of what is most scarce in the darkness where the pressure is enough to fracture a human skull in less than a second, in the delight of, at last, seeing light. So you draw close, closer still. The horror is in the reveal: The hand pushing your body away. The gaping mouth and all its teeth. The feel of a knife on a furred throat, like slicing ripe fruit. There is current debate about the legality of hooding under the Geneva Convention; some call it a form of torture. Hooding, we might say, renders the hooded subject’s entire experience of the world abject. We might also say the female anglerfish employs the dark as a hood, a falsehood whose guise falls only in the throes of death. As she palpates the places I will never see, I ask my doctor, Am I normal?

As the male Anglerfish’s skin fuses with his mate’s, as their blood mixes, he begins to lose his fins, his ability to swim. He becomes a parasite used only when she is ready to spawn. This is, in fact, a direct reversal of the trope of the vagina dentata, as the male, rather than castration, faces being rendered to only his genitals. He cannot think; he has no agency. Odysseus, tied to the mast of his ship, begs to be released to the Sirens, to his death on the rocks. This is the fear of the succubus: the being that renders a male lifeless through seduction. The being that absorbs virility, grows stronger, multiplies, even. In fact, female anglerfish have been found with as many as eight males fused into their soft bellies. In the female body of the anglerfish the anxieties of misogyny are realized. That women are deceitful. That women might grow larger and stronger in the face of scarcity and intense pressure closing in around them. That our bodies are tombs for our mates from which they can never escape.

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Our bodies are tombs for our mates from which they can never escape until they simply leave us, of their own agency. The female's monstrous sexual power is really a half-power, bestowed only to those worthy of the male gaze. Taken back with age. In horror films, the monster figure often represents a collapse between the animal and human boundary. The strange mating ritual of the anglerfish: the way his instinct is to eat her raw, the way her instinct is to both let him and absorb him, ruptures the boundary between self and other, but it also ruptures the boundary between animal and human because our notions of selfhood do not allow for an instinct that harms the self, for desire so purified. All I am asking is that we imagine this blurred boundary, just for a moment, not as grotesque, but as loving. I can never know another being so fully, nor would I exactly want to, yet I imagine a kind of comfort as the fish grow into each other. This is not like a death. No, this is like reincarnation.

A small fiction in which you are the male anglerfish goes like this. You are alone in the darkness of the deep sea. A dark and a cold that you can never leave. You can never ascend to the parts of the ocean that are blue because your body will disintegrate. But you are only the size of a little finger, so no one will notice your body, a wisp of oil against the dark. You cannot hear, you cannot see. So you let everything in through your mouth, your nose. Tasting and smelling your way through the brine until her scent enters you and your desire frightens you. You find her body with your mouth. You draw near her light, and though it is not warm, it is as though a current wraps you in its arms, pulling you close. This is the moment where instinct matters most. You must tear away from the light, because in graying shadows beyond the orb, her mouth hangs open like a question, and her teeth glint a nightmarish answer. Though all you know is that you are suddenly hungry for a softness in the dark.

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All you know is that you are suddenly hungry for a softness in the dark. Needs like this one grow, over time, into the creatures we fear most, what we most fear in ourselves. I did not want to kill the rabbit. I did not mean for the man who forced his hand into my jeans to learn that I do not have the stomach for suffering silently, for a slow bleed. The man I loved with sharpness, with teeth, learned that the pressure required to shatter bone makes the site of a break denser and stronger when healed. Evolution frightens because it is not controlled by will or intellect. It feeds on strife, on deprivation, morphs instincts and bodies. Once a man said to me, you have a lot of power and you're enjoying it. I did enjoy it, the way my assaulted body contained the proof that would ruin my assaulter. That is also the truth of the dark ceratioid: its body hangs perfectly still, the mouth wide. The lure promises safety. The horror is being unable to see what lies beyond the light of the lure: what you never see coming.

The first time I saw her, skinny and molting in an aquarium, I was not afraid, but I understand why others are afraid of her. When I say this I am not trying to alleviate fear. It is not my duty to make men unafraid now. Men hide in the Bathysphere, separated by one and a half inches of steel, a window of three inches of fused quartz. They descend fathoms down until the heat ebbs from their bodies, condenses, wet and smelling of blood on the walls. The females float, quiet, lazily fanning their fins, rippling their spines, unseen besides a glinting. In this place, the men cannot survive for long. They note their oxygen levels. They are blubbery and awkward. I cannot restore what tons of pressure, what scarcity, took from the female ceratioid. I cannot ease the violence of the deep, cannot mend her loneliness. I can grow monstrosity from my beauty. I can live in darkness, choose to be ugly, choose to be able. I say let us begin with your lure, with the way that its light beckons come closer.

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