

Gills

By Jinyoung Lee

It was the summer we were seventeen, during PE class. The sight of you washing your hair at the outdoor tap, shaking your head, etched itself into my eyes in slow motion.

In that split second, as the water droplets scattered and shattered in the sunlight, I knew I loved you.

And just before that dangerous sentence could spill from my mouth, I gulped and swallowed it back down my throat.

It traveled down my esophagus and landed somewhere in my stomach, *thump!*

I felt sick. Maybe it was just a small piece of undigested apple during lunch. But that night, I felt a faint tickling just beneath my breastbone.

Flutter.

And it was swimming inside me.

At first, it was about the size of a little pet guppy. You know, the same thing I got as a school project in primary school. Blue. I still remember you holding a little goldfish between your hands.

When you called my name, that little guppy wagged its tail in my belly. When you headed to the cafeteria laughing with someone else, *not me*, it raised its fins and scratched the walls of my stomach. I often clutched my abdomen.

The school nurse called it gastritis, and my mom said it was stress. I didn't say a word. I was terrified that an X-ray would capture a blue fish swimming between my ribs.

The seasons changed, and the fish inside me grew. Now, the creature was as big as a carp. Every time it tossed and turned, it pressed against my lungs, making it hard to breathe.

And I learned to keep my mouth shut whenever you were near. I felt like if I opened it, the smell of it would seep out, or its tail might slip through my lips.

You, you misunderstood my silence.

—What's up with you lately? Are you mad at me or something?

When you grabbed my shoulder and asked, the fish thrashed. It wanted to leap out toward you. The impact against my heart made me dry heave. Salty water leaked through the fingers covering my mouth.

–No, my stomach’s just acting up.

I lied. What I didn’t realize was that lies made for excellent fish food. That night, the creature swelled up as if it was going to break one of my ribs. My body was no longer made of human organs; it was turning into a small aquarium only meant to cage that damn thing.

I grew thinner and thinner, as the creature stole all my nutrients. Dry flakes began peeling from my skin. I drank ice water even in the dead of winter, hoping the fish inside me would suffocate and just vanish without anyone knowing.

It was a week before graduation. The classroom was loud with kids passing around rolling papers. *Typical*. I thought, until you walked over to my desk. In your hand was a blank sheet of paper, nothing written yet.

–Hey, Finn.

You hesitated.

–Uh, you really have nothing to say to me? I can’t even get a word out of you lately.

I hung my head. Oh, *something to say*. There was only one thing left for me to say but it wasn’t just resting on the tip of my tongue. By now, the creature had grown as massive as a whale, moving all the way up to my throat.

With every breath, I thought I could hear the wet, slippery sound of its gills. *Please, don’t do this*.

–Not really.

I squeezed out my voice, which was clearly damp as if soaked in water. Boom, you looked disappointed. And it would be a lie if I didn’t feel any shame.

The moment you turned to leave, the massive thing inside me struck my esophagus with its tail.

Bang!

An unbearable pressure shot up to the bottom of my jaw, and my vision flared white. If I kept my mouth shut like this, I would suffocate and die. If I opened it, everything would be destroyed. I had to choose. Would I kill myself, or lose you?

–Rowen.

The moment I barely parted my lips, the dam broke. What spilled out before any words was an immense surge of water. Clear, blue water gushed onto the classroom floor. And then, with my jaw stretched as if it would tear apart, the colossal thing I had nurtured for three years burst.

It was a hideous, beautiful fish. An unrealistically glowing blue beast, its entire body built from my blood and tears. It swam through the air, circling around you. The air filled with the scent of the ocean.

I collapsed onto the floor, panting. Cold, incredibly cold air rushed into my hollow stomach. It was the first real breath I had taken in a long time.

Trembling with fear, I looked up. I thought you would run away, looking at me as if I was something alien-ish.

But you didn't run. Soaking wet, you stood there blankly, watching the giant fish. Then, you slowly reached out. The moment your fingertips touched its scales, the thrashing creature became docile, rubbing its head against your palm.

—This must have been painful for you.

You said. You unbuttoned your shirt and showed me your chest. There, just below your collarbone, I could see a small, red goldfish swimming.

You, too, had been swallowing it.

We sat facing each other in the middle of the flooded classroom. My giant blue fish circled around your tiny red fish.

I decided not to make excuses anymore. And I let the warm air flood into my lungs.