

Bathysphere

By: Todd Campbell

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BATHYSPHERE

Everything drifts to the bottom: wine jars, cigarette butts, ships' masts, rusted twists of cable. Pale flecks of skin and bone. Once we thought there was nothing down here, a dead zone. The truth is much stranger—the depths alive with creatures so delicate a wave of your hand will rend them to shreds. Slack-jawed fish, teeth like needles. Mollusks with shells of iron. Carnivores, parasites, pallid worms. All of them luminous. The abyss pulses violet, ruby, persimmon, chartreuse. The snow never stops falling—ceaseless sifting of erosions, abrasions, tailings, and slag. Sneakers, wind-up toys, and empty picture frames washed from the decks of storm-tossed ships. Abandoned fishing nets hung with lace of half-eaten herring and hake. Silt and sorrow. Explore it at your peril. Climb into the steel-hulled sphere. Tighten the brass fittings to seal the hatch. Check the batteries, adjust the dials. Arrange your notebooks and grease pens on a narrow ledge below the porthole fashioned from thick slabs of clear quartz. Unpack your thermos and hardboiled eggs. Wait for the chain-rattle of the winch as it slowly unwinds. The bone-juddering smack of steel against water. Surface tension that keeps you, so briefly, afloat. Listen, as you descend fathom after fathom from daylight to half light to twilight past the edge of darkness, to the silence. The strange moan of metal under pressure. The distant sound of your breathing. Pray for the rivets and seams to hold. Pray the fragile assembly that keeps you tethered to the surface never breaks.