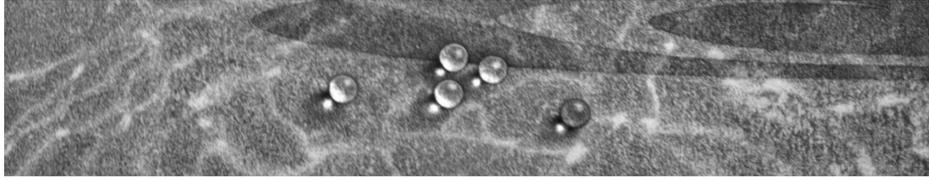


John Crowley | Peter Milton *Little, Big*

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Suppose One Were a Fish

The stream that fed the lake fell down a long stony distance like a flight of stairs from a broad pool carved by a tall waterfall high up within the woods.

Spears of moonlight struck the silken surface of that pool, and were bent and shattered in the depths. Stars lay on it, rising and falling with the continual arc of ripples that proceeded from the foamy falls. So it would appear to anyone at the pool's edge. To a fish, a great white trout almost asleep within, it seemed very different.

Asleep? Yes, fish sleep, though they don't cry; their fiercest emotion is panic, the saddest a kind of bitter regret. They sleep wide-eyed, their cold dreams projected on the black and green interior of the water. To Grandfather Trout it seemed that the living water and its familiar geography were being shuttered and revealed to him as sleep came and went; when the pool was shuttered, he saw inward interiors. Fish-dreams are usually about the same water they see when they're awake, but Grandfather Trout's were not. So utterly other than trout-stream were his dreams, yet so constant were the reminders of his watery home before his lidless eyes, that his whole existence became a matter of supposition. Sleepy suppositions supplanted one another with every pant of his gills.

Suppose one were a fish. No finer place to live than this. Falls continually drowning air within the pool so that it was a pleasure simply to breathe. Like (supposing one were not a water-breather) the high, fresh, wind-renewed air of an alpine meadow. Wonderful, and thoughtful of them so to provide for him, supposing that they thought of his or anyone's happiness or comfort. And here were no predators, and few competitors, because (though a fish couldn't be supposed to know it) the stream above was shallow and stony and so was the stream below, so that nothing approaching him in size came into the pool to contest with him for the constant fall of bugs from the dense and various woods that overhung. Really, they had thought of everything, supposing they thought of anything.

Yet (supposing that it was not his choice at all to be a swimmer here) how condign and terrible a punishment, bitter an exile. Mounted in liquid glass, unable to breathe, was he to make back-and-forth forever, biting at mosquitoes? He supposed that to a fish that taste was the toothsome matter of his happiest dreams. But if one were not a fish, what a memory, the endless multiplication of those tiny drops of bitter blood.

Suppose on the other hand (supposing one had hands) that it was all a Tale. That however truly a satisfied fish he might appear to be, or however reluctantly accustomed to it he had become, that once-on-a-time a fair form would appear looking down into the rainbow depths, and speak words she had wrested from malign secret-keepers at great cost to herself, and with a strangulating rush of waters he would leap – legs flailing and royal robes drenched – to stand before

her panting, restored, the curse lifted, the wicked fairy weeping with frustration. At the thought a sudden picture, a colored engraving, was projected before him on the water: a bewigged fish in a high-collared coat, a huge letter under his arm, his mouth gaping open. In air. At this nightmare image (from where?) his gills gasped and he awoke momentarily; the shutters shot back. All a dream. For a while he gratefully supposed nothing but sane and moonshot water.

Of course (the shutters began to drift closed again) it was possible to imagine he was one of them, himself a secret-keeper, curse-maker, malign manipulator; an eternal wizard intelligence housed for its own subtle purposes in a common fish. Eternal: suppose it to be so: certainly he has lived forever or nearly, has survived into this present time (supposing (drifting deeper) this to be the present time); he has not expired at a fish's age, or even at a prince's. It seems to him that he extends backwards (or is it forwards?) without beginning (or is it end?) and he can't just now remember whether the great tales and plots that he supposes he knows and forever broods on lie in the to-come or lie dead in the has-been. But then suppose that's how secrets are kept, and age-long tales remembered, and unbreakable curses made too....

No. They know. They don't suppose. He thinks of their certainty, the calm, inexpressive beauty of their truth-telling faces and task-assigning hands, as unrefuseable as a hook deep in the throat. He is as ignorant as a fingerling; knows nothing; he wouldn't care to know – wouldn't care to ask them, even supposing (another inward window slides open silently) they would answer, whether on a certain night in August a certain young man. Standing on these rocks that lift their dry brows into the perishing air. A young man struck by metamorphosis as this pool was once struck by lightning. For presumably some affront, you have your reasons, don't get me wrong, it's nothing to do with me. Only suppose this man imagines remembering, imagines his only and final memory to be (the rest, all the rest, is supposition) the awful strangulated gasping in deadly waterlessness, the sudden fusing of arms and legs, the twisting in air (air!) and then the horrible relief of the plunge into cold, sweet water where he ought to be – must now be forever.

And suppose he cannot now remember *why* it happened: only supposes, dreaming, that it did.

What was it he did to hurt you so?

Was it only that the Tale required some go-between, some *maquereau*, and he came close enough to be seized?

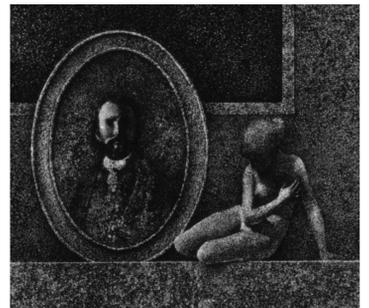
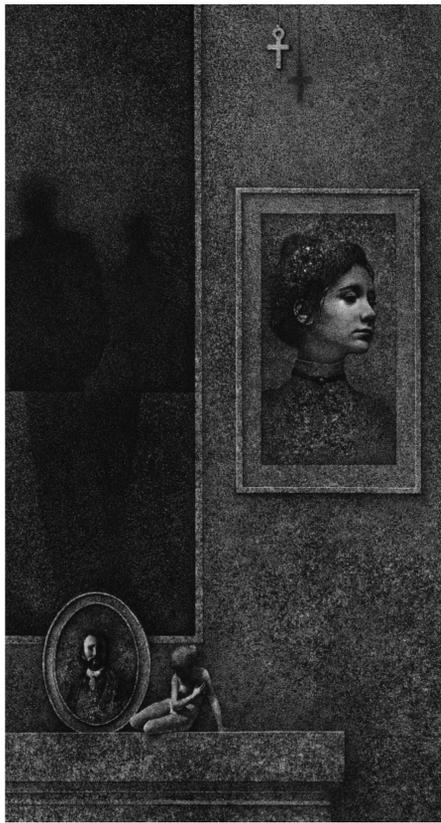
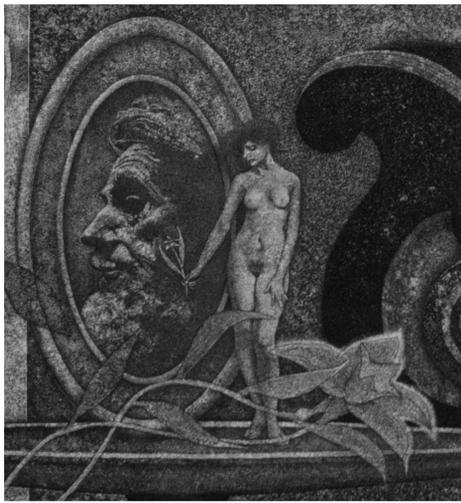
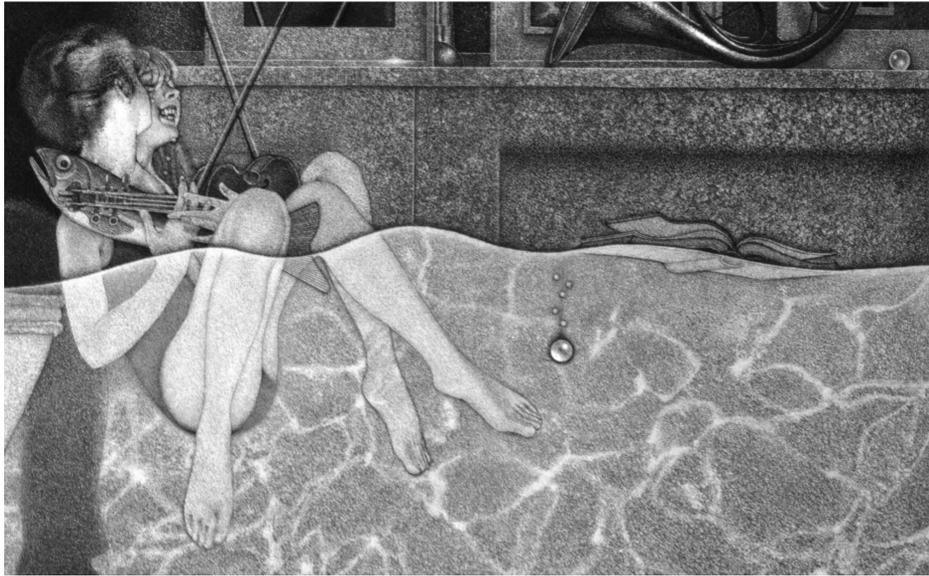
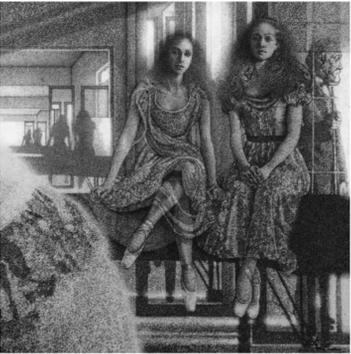
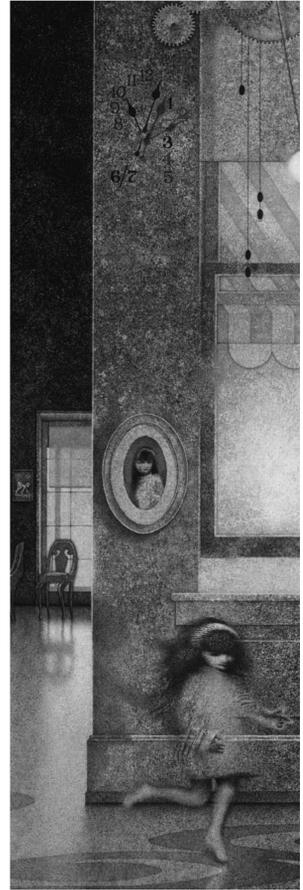
Why can't I remember my sin?

But Grandfather Trout is deep asleep now, for he could not suppose any of this if he were not. All shutters are shut before his open eyes, the water is all around and far away. Grandfather Trout dreams that he's gone fishing.



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