

Landscape, with Fish

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ILLUSTRATED BY WILL KOFFMAN

IN WHICH THE
THEORY OF
EVOLUTION SEEMS
RELEVANT YET
BESIDE THE POINT

YOU GOTTA CONTROL your fish better,” Willis said. “They’re scaring my dog.”

Tom nodded. “Didn’t know they could go so far. It’s interesting.”

“The first time, yes,” Willis agreed. “After that, it’s nasty. The dog ain’t the same.”

“Easy now, it’s just a fish.”

“I hear they eat things you wouldn’t think. I hear they slide right under doors.”

“That ain’t true, about the doors. You’re thinking of mice, not fish. These fish eat mice, so they’re more like cats. Only not so fast, I think. At least, I haven’t seen ’em move that fast.”

“I hear,” Willis said slowly, “I hear they can get in the pipes. You know, you’re sitting on the john . . .”

“Now that’s damn foolish,” Tom said. “That’s maligning my fish.”

“Keep ’em on a leash,” Willis said flatly. “And put up some kind of fence.”

“It’s a good thing we’re friendly,” Tom said shortly. “Or I’d be annoyed.” With that, Tom lowered his head and left. He came across one of those special-order fish of his on the well-worn path



back to his own house, and he kicked it a little. It made a kind of hissing sound.

"You watch it," he said to the fish. "You were meant to be eaten, you know." He looked at the fish, its big toothy mouth, its snaky head. "Though I wouldn't want to see you on my plate. Not without gravy anyway."

He poked the fish back to the pond and set to putting up a fence around it. "Fencing a pond," he grumbled. "Damn foreign fish."

He pounded in the posts and put up the mesh. The fish sort of hopped along the ground so it didn't have to be high. The job went easily.

He thought it was his imagination when he heard the pops against his window in the morning. He sat at the kitchen table and had his coffee first, that was his rule. He saw movements, like big flies, out of the side of his eyes, but he waited to catch them dead-on.

He saw one, finished his coffee, saw another, and got up.

They were leaving oval slimy smears on the windows and falling in the bushes around the house. A little stunned they were, obviously shook up till they got their wits about them again. It annoyed Tom when he saw them, because it meant there'd be trouble. He didn't have the kind of neighbors that would let a thing like this go by without comment.

He never actually saw them take off — he always caught them flying, instead — but he had to assume they did a kind of leap first, so he put up a higher fence.

That didn't stop them, and his windows were getting all smeared. Well, then, some kind of tent would do it. He stared at his little pond, which, when you started thinking about covering it, got a whole lot bigger. He sighed. It might be best if he got Willis to help him. It was hardly a secret he could keep.

Kind of strange he hadn't heard from Willis anyway, he thought, as he walked the old path to his neighbor's house. There were fish in the trees and they sometimes dropped

on top of him with a wet thwack and an unpleasant snapping of teeth. They hadn't quite got the hang of it yet; they landed upside down and their teeth went nowhere.

Willis' place was looking a little off. The grass must have gone to seed because there was a whole flock of grackles standing off to the side making grackly cackles.

"Psst," Willis said, tapping on his window from inside. "Get in here."

Tom stepped inside.

"No problems getting through?" Willis whispered. "You didn't hear anything?"

Tom frowned. "Well, there's birds outside. I did hear that."

Willis drew in a long breath. "What were they saying?"

With that, Tom started to actually listen to the murmur outside, which wasn't exactly the regular kind of bird talk. He stepped to the window. The birds were walking around, meeting in groups. He listened hard.

The birds were saying, "WILLIS Willis Willis. WILLIS Willis Willis."

He stepped away from the window. "Now, that's creepy," he said.

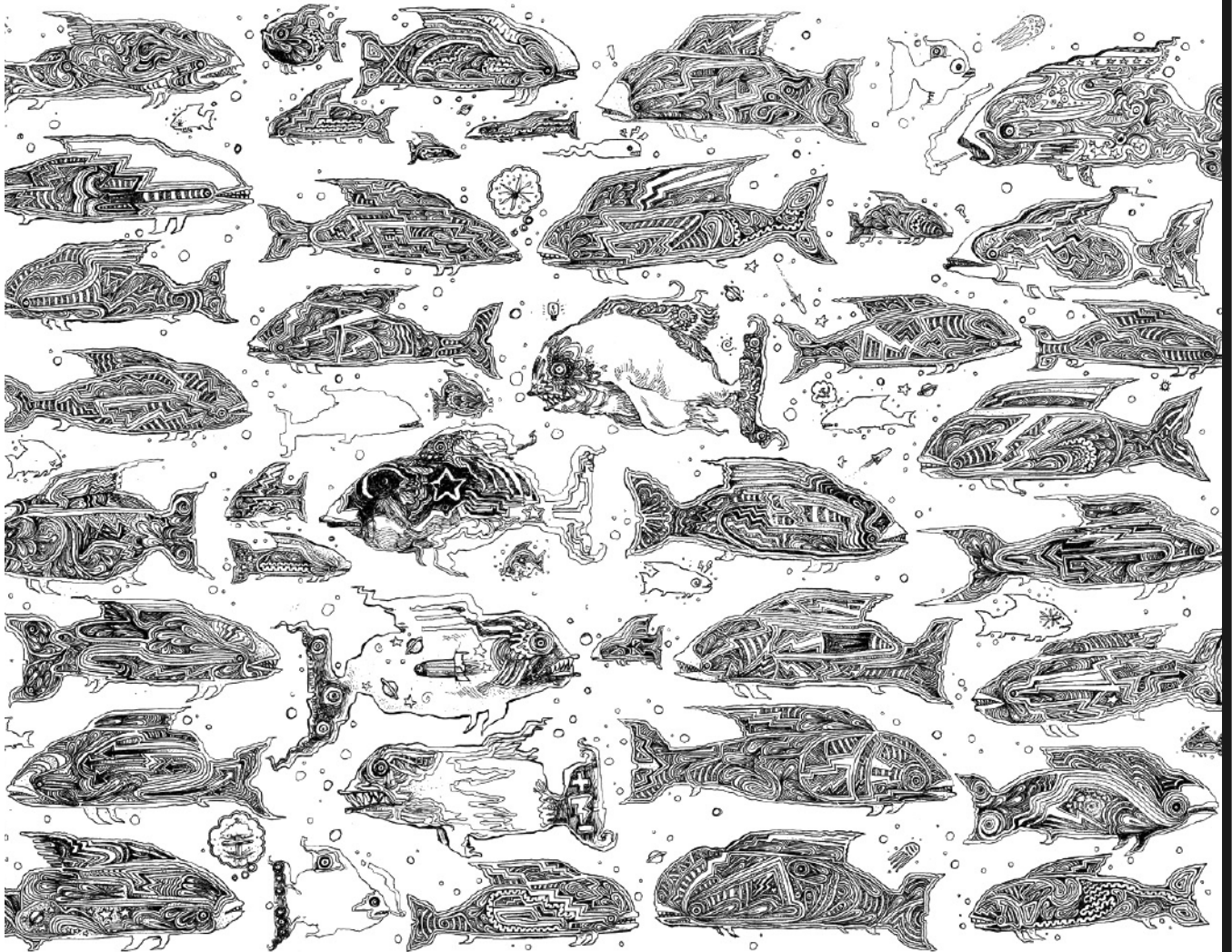
Willis nodded. "Did they say anything about you?"

Tom listened again, but there was nothing but Willis in the air. "No," he said. "It's just you."

"What if they start lying?" Willis asked. "Won't nobody believe me over birds." His eyes got filmy. "How much do you think they know?"

Tom went out down the path and picked up a few of his fish. It seemed like they'd followed him part way. Some fish hopped along behind him back to Willis' place, and when he got to the grackles one fish reared up and grabbed a bird by the wing. Tom kicked it free, watching that bird rise up and join the others scattering overhead. As long as they were talking, they could talk about that.

Willis peeked from his window until the yard was clear and then he came out. "Those fish of yours," he said. "Mighty evil looking. They got a temper?"



“Sweet as can be,” Tom said. “They get attached, too, just like a dog.”

“I think my dog ran out on me. Kind of miss him.”

They stood for a while in silence, watching the fish. They were flapping on the ground, wiggling their tails back and forth till they started making a bunch of holes around the yard. Then they each settled into a hole and turned their heads towards the two men by the house.

“Well,” Tom said. “Looks like they’re planning on staying. You want ’em?”

Willis nodded. “I can see their attraction now. They’ll keep the yard free anyway. And they’re quiet — I like that.”

Tom nodded. “Real quiet,” he said. “You never hear them coming. You never know they’re there.”

Satisfied, the two men looked at the fish, and the fish in their trenches looked back at them. ©

Karen Heuler's stories have appeared in anthologies and in many literary and commercial magazines. She has published two novels and a short story collection, and has won an O. Henry award. Her latest novel, “Journey to Bom Goody,” concerns strange doings in the Amazon. She lives, writes, and teaches in New York, which has its own share of strange doings.