



# BLUE FISH

by DELANEY HARTMANN

I am eighteen months old, flying through the sky. The chains that suspend me hit their peak, and I soar back down towards my dad's open palms, waiting to push the swing again. This is our Saturday morning routine. We eat scrambled eggs and sausage—he cuts mine into little pieces—pack the stroller with water bottles and toys, and head to the neighborhood playground. Once I tire of the swing, Dad lets me waddle around the park and explore. I examine shiny pebbles and run my fingers through blades of grass. I learn to trust that my legs will hold me.

My favorite feature of the playground is a large, plastic, blue fish. The fish is hollowed out in the middle to provide a bench and handle so that children can rock back and forth. Essentially a rocking-horse, this fish is my favorite because of its smooth plastic skin and big eyes. Sitting on its bench, I use the weight of my body to tip forwards and backwards, enjoying the way my stomach flips with the movement. I watch as a mother and her son approach my rocking-fish. The mother makes small talk with Dad, probably discussing the weather.

“Your daughter is so cute, and so tiny!” she says suddenly to Dad.

She doesn’t know that she has hit a sore spot, as my dad and mom are concerned about my health. I was born with complications, and I am much smaller than other eighteen-month-olds. Dad tries to direct the conversation back to the weather, but the mother keeps discussing my size, and how “she can’t be more than ten months old!”

Dad tells her that I am eighteen months old, and she suggests that I need to be fed more. She tells Dad that her son, Jeffrey, is two years old and so smart! As she says this, Jeffrey walks towards the fish I play on.

He points at the fish, walks back to his mother and says “Wawa! Wawa!” His mother is thrilled.

“Yes, Jeffrey, that’s water! Great job.” She looks to Dad and brags, “See, Jeffrey knows all sorts of things!”

I climb off the fish’s bench and walk towards Jeffrey. I look him in the eye, point at the fish, and say clearly, “Blue. Fish.” Dad suppresses a laugh and looks at the mother.

“I think she’ll be alright,” he says.



I am eight years old, in third grade. During my time in elementary school, I have learned that boys and girls are different. Boys are good at sports and girls are good at crafts. Boys are strong and girls are sweet.

I stand on the sidelines while the boys play soccer, even though I just got new cleats.

I keep my hands in my lap, even when I know the answer to the teacher’s question.

I stay quiet when one boy bullies another, even though I know it’s wrong.



I am eleven, in middle school.

I let the boy in Spanish class lead our presentation, even though I practiced for longer.

I sing quietly in choir, even though I know all the words.

I hear that boys are better at math than girls.



I am sixteen, in high school.

I don’t speak up when a boy grabs a girl’s ass without consent.

I let it slide when a teacher makes a sexist comment.

I learn to question myself.



I am twenty-one, and I meet with my therapist every week. Our topics of conversation change frequently, but there is a common thread. I want to know: How do I unlearn my cultural conditioning? I tell my therapist that I don’t want to be small or quiet or demure. I want to be a woman who takes up space, speaks her mind, and is confident in herself. This process of unlearning is slow, and it is not linear. But over time, a sense of rebellion builds up inside me, and it fuels my confidence. It becomes easier to take up space and speak my mind. I raise my hand during lectures and stand up for people who need an ally. I feel increasingly comfortable demanding respect. Sometimes, my confidence falters. I tell myself that I am too bossy, or too opinionated, or too bold. But I am reminded by my therapist, my mother, and my friends that these are words given to women who can’t be controlled. I do not want to be controlled.

Over many years, the conviction I was born with was teased out of me. This life teaches young girls to sit back and shut up, and it does so with impunity. If they are lucky, these girls might get the chance to unlearn this sexist conditioning, just like I am trying to do.

If I know that it’s a blue fish, I say so. ✎

