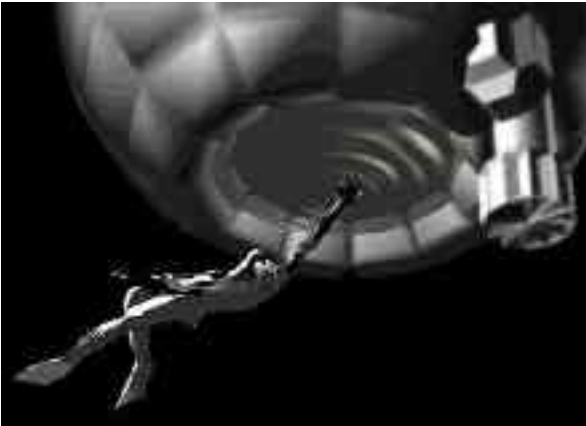


This is a nifty little piece, albeit nothing new to those familiar with Starfish. It started life as a coda to that book, ultimately discarded except for a paragraph or two that ended up elsewhere in the plot. But it's a creepy enough tale in its own right, and stands on its own, and it might even make the point better than the original "A Niche" did. (It certainly does so more efficiently; smaller cast, fewer words, less plot.) Ultimately it came out in On Spec¹ in the summer of 1999, coinciding with Starfish's initial release.

This is also the only story to date that I've illustrated myself, although OS never used the illustration.



Home
by
Peter Watts

It has forgotten what it was.

Not that that matters, down here. What good is a name when there's nothing around to use it? This one doesn't remember where it came from. It doesn't remember the murky twilight of the North

¹ Watts, P. 1999. Home. On Spec 11(1): 69-75.

Pacific Drift, or the noise and gasoline aftertaste that drove it back below the thermocline. It doesn't remember the gelatinous veneer of language and culture that once sat atop its spinal cord. It doesn't even remember the long slow dissolution of that overlord into dozens of autonomous, squabbling subroutines. Now, even those have fallen silent.

Not much comes down from the cortex any more. Low-level impulses flicker in from the parietal and occipital lobes. The motor strip hums in the background. Occasionally, Broca's area mutters to itself. The rest is mostly dead and dark, worn smooth by a sluggish black ocean cold as antifreeze. All that's left is pure reptile.

It pushes on, blind and unthinking, oblivious to the weight of four hundred liquid atmospheres. It eats whatever it can find. Desalinators and recyclers keep it hydrated. Sometimes, old mammalian skin grows sticky with secreted residues; newer skin, laid on top, opens pores to the ocean and washes everything clean with aliquots of distilled sea water.

The reptile never wonders about the signal in its head that keeps it pointing the right way. It doesn't know where it's headed, or why. It only knows, with pure brute instinct, how to get there.

It's dying, of course, but slowly. It wouldn't care much about that even if it knew.

*

Now something is tapping on its insides. Infinitesimal, precisely spaced shock waves are marching in from somewhere ahead and drumming against the machinery in its chest.

The reptile doesn't recognize the sound. It's not the intermittent grumble of conshelf and sea bed pushing against each other. It's not the low-frequency ATOC pulses that echo dimly past en route to the Bering. It's a pinging noise — *metallic*, Broca's area murmurs, although it doesn't know what that means.

Abruptly, the sound intensifies.

The reptile is blinded by sudden starbursts. It blinks, a vestigial act from a time it doesn't remember. The caps on its eyes darken

automatically. The pupils beneath, hamstrung by the speed of reflex, squeeze to pinpoints a few seconds later.

A copper beacon glares out from the darkness ahead — too coarse, too steady, far brighter than the bioluminescent embers that sometimes light the way. Those, at least, are dim enough to see by; the reptile's augmented eyes can boost even the faint twinkle of deepwater fish and turn it into something resembling twilight. But this new light turns the rest of the world stark black. Light is never this bright, not since—

From the cortex, a shiver of recognition.

It floats motionless, hesitating. It's almost aware of faint urgent voices from somewhere nearby. But it's been following the same course for as long it can remember, and that course points only one way.

It sinks to the bottom, stirring a muddy cloud as it touches down. It crawls forward along the ocean floor.

The beacon shines down from several meters above the sea bed. At closer range it resolves into a string of smaller lights stretched in an arc, like photophores on the flank of some enormous fish.

Broca sends down more noise: *Sodium floods*. The reptile burrows on through the water, panning its face from side to side.

And freezes, suddenly fearful. Something huge looms behind the lights, bloating gray against black. It hangs above the sea bed like a great smooth boulder, impossibly buoyant, encircled by lights at its equator. Striated filaments connect it to the bottom.

Something else, changes.

It takes a moment for the reptile to realize what's happened: the drumming against its chest has stopped. It glances nervously from shadow to light, light to shadow.

"You are approaching Linke Station, Aleutian Geothermal Array. We're glad you've come back."

The reptile shoots back into the darkness, mud billowing behind it. It retreats a good twenty meters before a dim realization sinks in.

Broca's area knows those sounds. It doesn't understand them — Broca's never much good at anything but mimicry — but it has heard something like them before. The reptile feels an

unaccustomed twitch. It's been a long time since curiosity was any use.

It turns and faces back from where it fled. Distance has smeared the lights into a diffuse, dull glow. A faint staccato rhythm vibrates in its chest.

The reptile edges back towards the beacon. One light divides again into many; that dim, ominous outline still lurks behind them.

Once more the rhythm falls silent at the reptile's approach. The strange object looms overhead in its girdle of light. It's smooth in some places, pockmarked in others. Precise rows of circular bumps, sharp-angled protuberances appear at closer range.

"You are approaching Linke Station, Aleutian Geothermal Array. We're glad you've come back."

The reptile flinches, but stays on course this time.

"We can't get a definite ID from your sonar profile." The sound fills the ocean. "You might be Deborah Linden. Deborah Linden. Please respond if you are Deborah Linden."

Deborah Linden. That brings memory: something with four familiar limbs, but standing upright, moving against gravity and bright light and making strange harsh sounds—

—laughter—

"Please respond—"

It shakes its head, not knowing why.

"—if you are Deborah Linden."

Judy Caraco, says something else, very close.

"Deborah Linden. If you can't speak, please wave your arms."

The lights overhead cast a bright scalloped circle on the ocean floor. There on the mud rests a box, large enough to crawl into. Two green pinpoints sparkle from a panel on one of its sides.

"Please enter the emergency shelter beneath the station. It contains food and medical facilities."

One end of the box gapes open; delicate jointed things can be seen folded up inside, hiding in shadow.

"Everything is automatic. Enter the shelter and you'll be all right. A rescue team is on the way."

Automatic. That noise, too, sticks out from the others. *Automatic* almost means something. It has personal relevance.

The reptile looks back up at the thing that's hanging overhead like, like,

—*like a fist*—

like a fist. The underside of the sphere is a cool shadowy refuge; the equatorial lights can't reach all the way around its convex surface. In the overlapping shadows on the south pole, something shimmers enticingly.

The reptile pushes up off the bottom, raising another cloud.

"Deborah Linden. The station is locked for your own protection."

It glides into the cone of shadow beneath the object and sees a bright shiny disk a meter across, facing down, held inside a circular rim. The reptile looks up into it.

Something looks back.

Startled, the reptile twists down and away. The disk writhes in the sudden turbulence.

A bubble. That's all it is. A pocket of gas, trapped underneath the

—*airlock*.

The reptile stops. It knows that word. It even understands it, somehow. Broca's not alone any more, something else is reaching out from the temporal lobe and tapping in. Something up there actually knows what Broca is talking about.

"Please enter the emergency shelter beneath the station—"

Still nervous, the reptile returns to the airlock. The air pocket shines silver in the reflected light. A black wraith moves into view within it, almost featureless except for two empty white spaces where eyes should be. It reaches out to meet the reptile's outstretched hand. Two sets of fingertips touch, fuse, disappear. One arm is grafted onto its own reflection at the wrist. Fingers, on the other side of the looking glass, touch metal.

"—locked for your own protection. Deborah Linden."

It pulls back its hand, fascinated. Inside, forgotten parts are stirring. Other parts, more familiar, try to send them away. The wraith floats overhead, empty and untroubled.

It draws its hand to its face, runs an index finger from one ear to the tip of the jaw. A very long molecule, folded against itself, unzips.

The wraith's smooth black face splits open a few centimeters; what's underneath shows pale gray in the filtered light. The reptile feels the familiar dimpling of its cheek in sudden cold.

It continues the motion, slashing its face from ear to ear. A great smiling gash opens below the eyespots. Unzipped, a flap of black membrane floats under its chin, anchored at the throat.

There's a pucker in the center of the skinned area. The reptile moves its jaw; the pucker opens.

By now most of its teeth are gone. It swallowed some, spat others out if they came loose when its face was unsealed. No matter. Most of the things it eats these days are even softer than it is. When the occasional mollusc or echinoderm proves too tough or too large to swallow whole, there are always hands. Thumbs still oppose.

But this is the first time it's actually seen that gaping, toothless ruin where a mouth used to be. It knows this isn't right, somehow.

"—Everything is automatic—"

A sudden muffled buzz cuts into the noise, then fades. Welcome silence returns for a moment. Then different sounds, quieter than before, almost hushed:

"Christ, Judy, is that you?"

It knows that sound.

"Judy Caraco? It's Jeannette Ballard. Remember? We went through prelim together. Judy? Can you speak?"

That sound comes from a long time ago.

"Can you hear me, Judy? Wave if you can hear me."

Back when this one was part of something larger, not an *it* at all, then, but—

"The machine didn't recognize you, you know? It was only programmed for locals."

—*she*.

Clusters of neurons, long dormant, sparkle in the darkness. Old, forgotten subsystems stutter and reboot.

I—

"You've come — my God, Judy, do you know where you are? You went missing off Juan de Fuca! You've come over three thousand kilometers!"

It knows my name. She can barely think over the sudden murmuring in her head.

"Judy, it's me. Jeannette. God, Judy, how did you last this long?"

She can't answer. She's just barely starting to understand the question. There are parts of her still asleep, parts that won't talk, still other parts completely washed away. She doesn't remember why she never gets thirsty. She's forgotten the tidal rush of human breath. Once, for a little while, she knew words like *photoamplification* and *myoelectric*; they were nonsense to her even then.

She shakes her head, trying to clear it. The new parts — no, the old parts, the very old parts that went away and now they've come back *and won't shut the fuck up* — are all clamoring for attention. She reaches into the bubble again, past her own reflection; once again, the ventral airlock pushes back.

"Judy, you can't get into the station. No one's there. Everything's automated now."

She brings her hand back to her face, tugs at the line between black and gray. More shadow peels back from the wraith, leaving a large pale oval with two smaller ovals, white and utterly featureless, inside. The flesh around her mouth is going prickly and numb.

My face! something screams. *What happened to my eyes?*

"You don't want to go inside anyway, you couldn't even stand up. We've seen it in some of the other runaways, you lose your calcium after a while. Your bones go all punky, you know?"

My eyes—

"We're airlifting a 'scaphe out to you. We'll have a team down there in fifteen hours, tops. Just go down into the shelter and wait for them. It's state of the art, Judy, it'll take care of everything."

She looks down into the open box. Words appear in her head: *Leg. Hold. Trap.* She knows what they mean.

"They—they made some mistakes, Judy. But things are different now. We don't have to change people any more. You just wait there, Judy. We'll put you back to rights. We'll bring you home."

The voices inside grow quiet, suddenly attentive. They don't like the sound of that word. *Home*. She wonders what it means. She wonders why it makes her feel so cold.

More words scroll through her mind: *The lights are on. Nobody's home.*

The lights come on, flickering.

She can catch glimpses of sick, rotten things squirming in her head. Old memories grind screeching against years of corrosion. Something lurches into sudden focus: worms, clusters of twitching, eyeless, pulpy snouts reaching out for her across the space of two decades. She stares, horrified, and remembers what the worms were called. They were called "fingers".

Something gives way with a snap. There's a big room and a hand puppet clenched in one small fist. Something smells like mints and worms are surging up between her legs and they *hurt* and they're whispering *shhh it's not really that bad is it*, and it is but she doesn't want to let him down *after all I've done for you* so she shakes her head and squeezes her eyes shut and just waits. It's years and years before she opens her eyes again and when she does he's back, so much smaller now, he doesn't remember he doesn't even fucking *remember* it's all *my dear how you've grown how long has it been?* So she tells him as the taser wires hit and he goes over, she tells him as his muscles lock tight in a twelve thousand volt orgasm; she shows him the blade, shows him up real close and his left eye deflates with a wet tired sigh but she leaves the other one, jiggling hilariously in frantic little arcs, so he can watch but shit for once there really is a cop around when you need one and here come the worms again, a hard clenched knot of them driving into her kidney like a piston, worms grabbing her hair, and they take her not to the nearest precinct but to some strange clinic where voices in the next room murmur about *optimal post-traumatic environments* and *endogenous dopamine addiction*. And then someone says *There's an alternative Ms. Caraco, a place you could go that's a little bit dangerous but then you'd be right at*

home there, wouldn't you? And you could make a real contribution, we need people who can live under a certain kind of stress without going, you know...

And she says *okay, okay, just fucking do it.*

And the worms burrow into her chest, devour her soft parts and replace them with hard-edged geometries of plastic and metal that cut her insides.

And then dark cold, life without breath, four thousand meters of black water pressing down like a massive sheltering womb...

"Judy, will you just for God's sake *talk* to me? Is your vocoder broken? Can't you answer?"

Her whole body is shaking. She can't do anything except watch her hand rise, an autonomous savior, to take the black skin floating around her face. The reptile presses edges together, here, and here. Hydrophobic side chains embrace; a slippery black caul stitches itself back together over rotten flesh. Muffled voices rage faintly inside.

"Judy, please just *wave* or something! Judy, what are you — where are you going?"

It doesn't know. All it's ever done is travel to this place. It's forgotten why.

"Judy, you can't wander too far away... don't you remember, our instruments can't see very well this close to an active rift—"

All it wants is to get away from the noise and the light. All it wants is to be alone again.

"Judy, wait — we just want to help—"

The harsh artificial glare fades behind it. Ahead there is only the sparse twinkle of living flashlights.

A faint realization teeters on the edge of awareness and washes away forever:

She knew this was home years before she ever saw an ocean.