

Arkana Aquarium

By Annie-Sage Whitehurst / annie.sage@gmail.com

Act I - Great Hall at Arkana Aquarium

Morning at a small, dilapidated aquarium nowhere near a body of water—this is Arkana Aquarium. The aquarium's signature sound is bubbling, humming, and waves.

*Note: Unless specified, all lines are sung.*

*Each act contains a stanza by the Fish Chorus, to be performed as written, but each act's chorus can also be repeated in the background and abstracted as the composer sees fit for the duration of each act.*

FX: Metallic locks clicking, a light switch, jewelry tinkling. MARGARET, the 40-something owner, a lady too stern for the amount of crystals she's wearing, is opening the aquarium for the day.

FX: Footsteps as: ARTHUR, 30s, crumpled in appearance and outlook, approaches.

RECITATIVE

MARGARET

There you are. I need you to start in the Coral Cove. And, what's your name, again?

ARTHUR

Arthur, ma'am/

MARGARET

/That's right.

Welcome aboard. Your sister speaks highly of you.

ARTHUR

Isabelle is very kind/

MARGARET

/She can be, sometimes.

You know this is a custodial position, right?

ARTHUR

Yes

MARGARET

But you were a professor?

ARTHUR

I used to be, yes.

MARGARET  
Ah, here she is.

FX: Light footsteps as ISABELLE, 30s, fluttery but well-intentioned, approaches

ISABELLE  
I see you've met the boss.

MARGARET  
Shall we let him get started?  
I'm expecting visitors!

ARTHUR  
Is there a tour?

ISABELLE  
No.

DUET

MARGARET  
Something better!

ISABELLE  
Margaret's investors.

MARGARET  
For our new wing.

ISABELLE  
She wants a whale in captivity

MARGARET  
It will save us from bankruptcy.

ISABELLE  
I told you, it won't fit in our facility

MARGARET  
Hush Isabelle, you just charm the investors  
And I'll take on the PETA protestors.  
A grand attraction will delay financial death

ISABELLE  
Arkana, God knows you're close to your last breath.  
It's not my fault but the business has started to rot,  
Yes, this poor aquarium is gushing blood, we're bleeding out-

ARTHUR (spoken)  
Would you mind using a different metaphor?

MARGARET  
What?

TRIO

ISABELLE  
Oh my god—I forgot—about your wife

MARGARET  
Oh! That's right.

ARTHUR  
It's fine

ISABELLE  
I'm so sorry, Arthur

ARTHUR  
Really, I—

MARGARET  
Well you know, nothing *really* dies.

ISABELLE  
Margaret!

ARTHUR  
It's alright

ISABELLE  
I'm sorry

MARGARET  
Well. We'll leave you to it. Isabelle?

Margaret and Isabelle walk away. The Coral Cove is an intimate room humming with tanks of fish.

ARIA

ARTHUR  
"The Mandarin dragonet: *Synchiropus splendidus*"  
Hello, little ones  
You fish sure look busy.  
That used to be me, how I loved to be dizzy  
With my studies of theories and catalogues,  
Obsessed with making order from the fog  
Every syllable and gesture a thing to dissect,  
Blinded by a fixation to label objects  
My heart, home and marriage, I let it infect  
Emotion was for the weak,  
Empathy, the inept,  
Until my wife took her own life.

## FISH CHORUS

An ever flowing current of energy,  
 Light from the sun can only travel so far in water.  
 Some like to find the warmer rocks, others don't bother.

## DUET

## ARTHUR

There's more beauty in an uncomplicated life.  
 With mystery comes misery and strife.  
 If there is a mess-  
 That voice, of course I hear her now.

## FISH CHORUS + AUDREY

An ever flowing current of energy  
 An ever flowing current of energy

## ARTHUR

Push the mop across the room.  
 If there is a mess, it can be swept soon.  
 Light from the sun can only travel so far in water

## FISH CHORUS + AUDREY

An ever flowing current of energy

## ARTHUR

In this newfound quiet,  
 I am hallucinating the voice of my wife.

## AUDREY

...flows from the new heart inside of me  
 One new heart and one old- \n  
 I've travelled so far in water

## ARTHUR

My Audrey, you're survived by my guilt  
 Audrey, I can hear you singing through my veins

## AUDREY

Babe I'm here to your left, in the tank

## ARTHUR

You are always with me-

## AUDREY

Ok not quite, honey. Turn around. Literally.

## ARTHUR

(spoken) There's nothing but fish here

## AUDREY

Hello, it's me.

(spoken) We have a lot to discuss.

## END OF ACT ONE

**ACT TWO**

INT. Great Hall– Where we left off.

## RECITATIVE

ARTHUR

Audrey, you're... a fish?

AUDREY

Yep! Insane, right?

So let's just, get that part out of the way.

Done?

ARTHUR

No.

FISH CHORUS

It takes a lifetime to understand

The weight of a body, and then you lose it

It could always be worse

It could always take two lifetimes

## DUET

AUDREY

I should have known.

Well, here I am

I've only been here a couple days,

Before this, I was also a fish. Well, an eel.

ARTHUR

I'm losing my grasp on what is real/

AUDREY

No Arthur, I'm telling you the truth

My body was longer and I felt colder

But I was scared all the time

ARTHUR

Her voice must just be in my mind

Option:

Audrey vocalises non-verbal sounds

ARTHUR

I'm hallucinating, this can't be.

I need to ground myself with things I can see

Black carpet, wooden bench, an educational plaque

And behind that

A fish who has been reincarnated twice

But she has the same look in her eyes-

AUDREY  
Stranger things have happened  
I can't believe that I found you  
I can finally tell you the truth.

ARTHUR (spoken)  
The truth?

AUDREY  
Of how I really died

ARIA

ARTHUR  
The suicide.  
How you left me behind?  
I keep playing our lives in rewind,  
Did I really put you in such a bind?

AUDREY  
Arthur, you beautiful idiot, Stop it.  
Can't I have anything of my own?  
Can't I even die  
Without it seeming to signify  
Something you did right or wrong?

RECITATIVE

ARTHUR  
But I know, it was because of me

AUDREY  
No, you narcissist

ARTHUR  
But, I made you so unhappy/

AUDREY  
No. Arthur.  
I wasn't even trying to kill myself.

ARTHUR  
What?

FISH CHORUS  
It takes a lifetime to understand  
The weight of a body, and then you lose it

ARIA

AUDREY

Alright so here's the thing  
Jesus, this is so embarrassing  
I didn't mean to do it—y'know, die.  
It was that off-brand Nyquil  
I got in bulk off Amazon—surprise.  
It was already three years expired  
But the date must've rubbed off  
You know how paranoid I can be  
About the onset of a cough  
So I chugged 'till I was drugged  
Put an experimental opera record on  
Took a nap in the bath for an hour and a half  
But y'know, clearly that went wrong.

RECITATIVE

ARTHUR

Are you serious?

AUDREY

Yep.

ARTHUR

I thought you stopped buying that stuff

AUDREY

I did, but then it went on sale

ARTHUR

Are you kidding me?

AUDREY

/are you?

ARTHUR

Wait. No, what I mean to say is: I'm sorry.

AUDREY

I know

ARTHUR

I mean for this, specifically

AUDREY

I know

ARTHUR

Jesus, what a way to go  
I have to smuggle you out of here.  
I have to take you home.

AUDREY

And then what?

ARTHUR

Then we can be together.  
I'll talk to Isabelle,  
Maybe I can make an offer,  
Or just steal you away/

FISH CHORUS

It takes a lifetime to understand

The weight of a body, and then you lose it

AUDREY

    /What's to stop her  
From calling the police?  
I'm technically  
The property  
Of Arkana Aquarium

It could always be worse

It could always take two lifetimes

The heels of MARGARET and ISABELLE clip down the Great Hall as they approach Arthur and Audrey in the Coral Cove. Their exchange is rapid-fire.

MARGARET

Isabelle, really, you didn't fight for me *at all* in that meeting/

DUET

ISABELLE

/I can't make miracles happen, Margaret  
It's clear they weren't going to bite.  
Doesn't take Sherlock to see that they're right.  
This is no home for a whale/

MARGARET

/Now you're just saying that out of spite

ISABELLE

Let's face it/

MARGARET

Don't you dare/

ISABELLE

The end of Arkana is in sight

AUDREY  
What?

FX: The Coral Cove door creaks open as AUDREY and ARTHUR listen to the fight just outside.

MARGARET  
Where's your enthusiasm for the impossible?

ISABELLE  
There's just no way to make this place profitable

MARGARET  
Now that we're in the red, you're done?  
Your kind of love can just run out of steam?

ISABELLE  
Take a deep breath and count to ten/

MARGARET  
Oh, if I'm calm, you can love me again?  
Fuck this.  
Fuck your fish.  
I'll put it all on the market:  
The aquarium, our apartment  
—And me.

QUICKIE QUARTET

AUDREY  
Sell the aquarium?

ARTHUR  
This is bad

MARGARET  
I knew this was what you wanted, to sell to that scumbag Max  
That abysmal coastal coral carpetbagger-

ARTHUR  
Uh oh-

ISABELLE  
Maxwell is an acclaimed aquatic biologist,  
Who has shown great interest in our collection

MARGARET  
What hasn't he shown great interest in

The man's a walking erection

ISABELLE

(an exasperated sigh)

This doesn't have to be a hostile environment.  
I'll draft up a contract before this gets violent

FX: Footsteps down the hall, in opposite directions.

ARTHUR

That's it.

I'm breaking you out of here.

END OF ACT TWO

### ACT III

INT. CORAL COVE—Where we left off.

ARTHUR

I'm getting you out of here.

Hmm...how do I get into here?

AUDREY

Arthur, this is a bad idea

ARTHUR

Look, whatever you need, I can get.

According to this, you are a

(reading)

"*Synchiropus splendidus*,  
the mandarin fish or mandarin dragonet,"

AUDREY (spoken)

Pretty, right?

ARTHUR (reading)

"Saltwater fish..." ...wait, what's this?

"Covered in sharp, tiny spines,

The dragonet can inject you with poisonous slime"

AUDREY

/So that's what that is/

ARTHUR

Why didn't you tell me you're covered in toxic mucus?

AUDREY

How am I supposed to know it's toxic?

ARTHUR

"...lifespan two to four years in captivity"

(Pause)

Well. I'd better get you out, fast.

AUDREY

Arthur, if I got back home, I wouldn't last.

ARTHUR

I'll get you a special tank and everything you need

AUDREY

You're not thinking clearly

ARTHUR

/I'm not losing you again

DUET

AUDREY

Arthur, people are just made to be lost.

You're just another soul, you can't control

What fortune I am tossed.

ARTHUR

Don't be so defeatist

AUDREY

Stop being so elitist.

You're no better than me,

just because you're bipedal.

You can't deny that change is real

just because you feel unsettled.

ARTHUR

I'm not giving up on us

AUDREY

There's no way to make "us" work anymore.

We're not the same "us" as we were before.

But if we can adapt and not regress

We can still find happiness

You are my heart, my love, my light, but I'll die if I leave this room.

How would my poisonous body work as your little spoon?

How could you afford to keep me alive, with all the copepods I consume?

I want to remember our house as a loving home, not make it twice my tomb.

ARTHUR

When I left my job at the college,  
I accepted a life of solitude.  
I took loneliness as a punishment  
For all that I put you through.

Giving up control makes me itchy  
I don't know what we should do next.  
But if I get to see you, even briefly again,  
I guess I can handle being perplexed.  
We can be—

FX: MARGARET and ISABELLE enter, cutting them off:

MARGARET

Beautiful and sad.  
Any relationship can go bad  
When there are too many demands

ARTHUR (startled)

Oh! I wasn't talking to—

ISABELLE

That mandarin dragonet?  
Don't worry about it.  
It reminds me of when I first met Margaret  
I had just gotten back from studying  
A swampy and mysterious ecosystem  
Near a high school in Michigan.

ARTHUR

What does that have to do with—

MARGARET

I charmed her ass off when we first met

ISABELLE

Until I got to know her and all her pet peeves  
And "charming" idiosyncrasies

MARGARET

Working and living together has been a bit tough.  
In a relationship each person needs space enough  
To grow and come into their own  
One person can't make all the decisions, alone.

ISABELLE

But sometimes, I like it when she gets rough,  
Turns out I'm into that kind of stuff.

ARTHUR + AUDREY

Uh...

ISABELLE + MARGARET

Love is a weight that comforts, and some like that pressure  
But Audrey will only find happiness when you let her

ARTHUR

/Wait, did you know Audrey was—

ISABELLE

*A Synchiropus splendidus?*

ISABELLE + MARGARET

Stranger things have happened.

ARTHUR

I heard you outside in the hall,  
Are you giving up Arkana after all?

MARGARET

I had some time to calm down,  
We consulted my crystals and found common ground.  
Honestly, I couldn't be happier.  
Now Isabelle and I can start our next chapter  
without the strains of a sinking business  
We can finally have time to...

ISABELLE

Dedicate ourselves to a more balanced and centered coexistence.

MARGARET

Yes. That.

ISABELLE

Don't worry, the buyer is keeping all the same staff.  
Except for me, and I guess Margaret too.  
So really, it's just the fish, the building, and you.

ARTHUR

I have so many questions about Audrey

ISABELLE

Well then you'd better ask her.  
We're taking the rest of the afternoon off

MARGARET and ISABELLE leave.

ARTHUR

You're sure things are better, this way?

AUDREY

As sure as I can be, about anything.

ARTHUR

In a way, I can finally take care of you  
I'm going to make everything up to you, Audrey.

AUDREY

So, what do you want to ask me?

(Pause)

ARTHUR

Will you tell me about when you were an eel?

AUDREY (with a smile as wide as a whale)

I will - and in excessive detail.

(option: Audrey/Arthur ad-lib as Fish Chorus crescendos from under them)

FISH CHORUS

(can be used in full or played with however the composer sees fit, but last stanza should be heard in full at least once)

An ever flowing current of energy,  
Light from the sun can only travel so far in water.  
Some like to find the warmer rocks, others don't bother.

It takes a lifetime to understand  
The weight of a body, and then you lose it  
It could always be worse  
It could always take two lifetimes.

Love is a weight that comforts,  
Some like the pressure.  
Follow the rock to the bottom.  
Some go farther than you would have let them.

END