

The Disappearers

You've probably seen one too many movies where goofy scientists stumble upon a cave filled with mysterious, slimy objects, but this isn't what you think. These objects come from a real creature on Earth.

We spoke with marine biologist and scuba-diving enthusiast George Callen about specimens washed ashore on Catalina Island, one of California's Channel Islands. Callen, who originally hails from Morehead City, explained that the bizarre objects are chrysalises that surround the fertilized eggs of some ocean-dwelling creatures like sharks and stingrays. Once the eggs have hatched, the sea washes the lightweight shells onto the beach. They can often be found at the strandline, the farthest point of the high tide. The egg cases can be identified by their glossy outer shell and soft, leathery interior, which protects fertilized eggs from collision.

Miller, J. "Investigating the Catalina Chrysalises". *Inside Science*. Issue 18, Jan 2015.

Cyril Christie disappeared in the afternoon.

It had happened like this: he had returned to his office having spent the previous two hours at a meeting across town with a prominent museum curator.

The meeting had been a success: after hearing about Cyril's research and credentials, the curator had granted him access to the museum's collection of objects, and there were some fascinating specimens. Cyril had stolen three.

He had been expecting some files that afternoon, and on entering the office he was irritated to see that they hadn't arrived yet. No doubt the Administrator had been gossiping at her desk and failed to deliver them.

He had been about to set out for the front desk to retrieve them himself, when at the edge of his vision he'd seen something shift in the room. It was hard to describe. Perhaps it was a subtle disruption in the composition of the interior. Or was it a slight tremor in the air? It was rather like seeing the ripples caused by something small weaving a path through a field of long grass, except in this case the disturbance appeared to float in the middle of his office. For a second it shimmered in his periphery, and then it was gone. If he'd had time, he'd no doubt have attributed it to a sudden gust of wind, or an anomaly in his vision. But he hadn't had time. The iridescent shiver was the last thing Cyril Christie remembered from that afternoon.

Amateur biologist and computer programmer Wanda Candelero claims there is more to these shells than meets the eye. Candelero, who collects and studies the eggs cases washed ashore on her native Catalina Island, speculates that some of the specimens could be centuries old, preserved by chemicals present in their deep-sea surroundings. Candelero has designed a unique program to analyse the substance of the shells, and claims to have identified high levels of arsenic in several samples. As well as being a fatal toxin, arsenic acts as a strong preservative.

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Cyril regained lucidity when the sounds of the first workers arriving jerked him back to consciousness. He stretched out his arm and to his shock found that nothing happened. A gush of acid terror lurched up his throat, pooling in his mouth. He tried again. Nothing. Thoughts hurtled through his mind, colliding at speed. This couldn't be a nightmare: the room was far too real, and his sight and hearing continued to operate as usual.

He tried his hand again, envisaging the glowing command shooting from his brain and passing from neuron to neuron at lightning speed. He willed his hand to move. It remained rigid. He lay on the ground, cold and immobile.

*Pebble said
you are so weak
and I have been so many things.*

It was still early, and Cyril estimated that his condition would not be noted for several hours, if not days, during which time he would languish in his office, starving. Or else he would petrify, the hardness of his bones leeching into his flesh and guts, leaving nothing but a cold lump of granite. He missed the pulsing activity of his organs, the warm blood pumping through his veins, the teeming procreation of cell upon cell.

Now that he was still, he was aware of a mass of sounds that he had previously overlooked. The walls yawned and inched sluggishly toward their inevitable collapse. Window frames moaned as they adjusted to minuscule changes in the atmosphere. A support beam in the ceiling sighed, and Cyril felt a chalky film of plaster form on his tongue.

Whilst he waited, Cyril looked over his pieces. He had many, many objects, almost all of which had been stolen. He was unsure as of yet what it was that connected each object to its brothers and sisters, but he felt confident that as he expanded his collection, the pattern would become clear. In the meantime, he filled makeshift cabinets and shelves, placing the newest, most exciting specimens on his office desk. That he himself had nowhere left to work was inconsequential, as he had long since abandoned his writing. He had assumed he would return to it when his collection began to reveal the secret network that bound it together. Now, he reflected that nobody would ever know what he had almost discovered, since no trace of his ideas remained. He dusted the objects with his breath and silently recited their stories.

*Pebble said when I began Air hummed closed his eyes
and swallowed me swilled me around and dribbled me
back into the sky and I was feather and ice and empty hot
nothing.*

When he had occupied the office in the more traditional sense, Cyril had been a scholar, pursuing research as part of a fellowship granted to him by the company in whose headquarters he was based. The company in question designed and manufactured ornaments and souvenirs for museum gift shops, supplying several countries across Europe and North America. The Director, who had attended art school before moving into the corporate side of things, had launched the 'Visiting Artists and Scholars' program as a way for the company to engage with the artistic and academic community. He felt it situated his institution within a contemporary, critical dialogue around object theory, feeding into the company's burgeoning artistic vision. Visiting artists and scholars were granted a workspace in the Administration Centre in the middle of the city, in close proximity to a host of important museums. They also had access to the factory building across town and the expertise of the technicians who operated the company's state of the art equipment.

Cyril had been a doctoral student at a prestigious university in the city. He had come to the office to pursue research following the departure of the last Fellow, an artist who had absconded rather suddenly, leaving behind all of her work, several folders of garbled manuscripts and, rather bizarrely, her passport. Cyril had originally come for twelve months, but, finding that his research had not progressed satisfactorily at the end of his first year, the Director had agreed to an extension of his tenancy in the building, and so on and so forth until the present day. This was Cyril's fourth year with the company.

Pebble said

Wouldn't you like to be forever?

Police confirmed this morning that three valuable mineral samples have disappeared from The City Museum of Natural History.

Authorities are said to be baffled: the pieces went missing from their secure, private storage yesterday afternoon. There are no records of staff admittance during this time, and security footage shows no trespassers. The disappearance was noted by the curator in charge of the collection and reported to the police shortly after.

Sanders, K. "Disappearances Rock the Boat in City Museum". *City Morning*. February 16 2016.

Cyril had been wrong to think that nobody would notice his predicament. The Administrator had entered Cyril's office at 4.30 that afternoon and had been surprised to find it empty. She was bringing the files that he had anticipated, which had arrived fifteen minutes earlier. She had been perplexed by his absence, but the phone started up again, so she left the files on his desk and rushed back to her own.

It wasn't until 10.45 the next morning, when the Administrator received a call from the Director enquiring after Cyril Christie's whereabouts, that she remembered his strange absence the night before. Mr. Christie had been due to meet the Board of Directors for a performance review that morning at 10.30, and he had failed to show up. She put the Director on hold and hurried down the corridor to check Cyril's office, finding it exactly as she had left it the previous evening. The files she had placed on his desk were still there, and now she tentatively removed them from their outer folder and read two articles, both clipped from recent editions of a popular, but ill reputed, science journal.

*Pebble said I can change.
I can slip in out.
I can be rock sand glass.
But I will always be Pebble.*

Perplexed, the Administrator returned to the phone and explained with concern that Cyril Christie appeared to be missing. Should she call the police? The Director dismissed the idea somewhat condescendingly, assuring her that Mr Christie had most likely caught a bug and would return in the coming days. He rang off quickly, feeling a little guilty.

Later, he had his personal secretary draft an online advertisement for a new Fellow, which would be circulated around universities and museums in the city. Try for an artist this time, he instructed. We need someone productive.

The news follows the bizarre disappearance of Walter Simon, a curator at the prominent city museum. Simon had been employed at the museum for three years, and was in charge of several of the museum's permanent collections, as well as being involved in temporary and touring exhibitions. Colleagues report that he seemed happy in his job and there was nothing erratic in his behaviour leading up to him being reported missing.

Sanders, K. "Disappearances Rock the Boat in City Museum". *City Morning*. February 16 2016.

Cyril Christie reflected on his position. In his scholarly days, he had treated his objects as static points of reference, considering each stone and shell to be evidence from which to extract information. Now, forced to observe for longer than he would have liked, Cyril sensed something in their steady presence that unsettled him. They were not still after all. They looked. They breathed.

Had he deliberately locked his objects into cabinets and boxes to avoid this realisation? Hadn't he always feared these things for whom his lifespan was nothing but a layer of dust? He remembered one night as a child, waking up paralysed, aware of a presence that surrounded him and whispered in the darkness.

*Pebble said let me take you out of you.
I can make you something old and strong.*

*Do you think you would miss the past coiling from the
corners of your eyes like yards of damp string?*

He drifted into an edgy sleep and found that the Administrator was in his office. She was sitting up straight on the chair behind his desk and knitting what appeared to be a bright orange blanket. She looked up, catching him watching her, and smiled. He felt an overwhelming sense of peace. He had always looked down on those who felt the need to create and had himself never made an object, always limiting himself instead to study and commentary. What could the fleshy human ever achieve that might rival the slow, blistering oppression of coal over centuries to make the malevolent diamond?

Today, however, he felt that in some way he understood the Administrator's primal urge to create, and he hoped that she might leave the finished blanket in his office.

Pebble said we're disappearers.

He wondered if his withdrawal from the space had somehow made way for the birth of the blanket.

Who knew what other objects, previously unseen, might awaken thanks to his vanishing?

Among other projects, Simon was preparing for the upcoming exhibition 'Plotting History: Objects at the Heart of Scandal'. The exhibition will explore objects that have inspired alternative theories around key events in history. Rumoured to be included are fragments of Napoleon's famed green wallpaper, said to have caused him to succumb to arsenic poisoning, and the now infamous Catalina Island chrysalises. The chrysalises were originally identified as empty egg cases produced by native sea-dwelling creatures. However, George Callen, the marine biologist who identified them as such, disappeared several days later. In the wake of this mystery, previously dismissed claims about the objects' toxicity resurfaced. The chrysalises have enjoyed notoriety ever since. Some have even speculated that the shells were planted, with suggested perpetrators ranging from extra-terrestrials to communist conspirators.

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Epochs drifted. Banks of sun and shadow fell and lifted, drifting across the room, washing over him where he lay, helpless and content.

Now that he had stopped trying to escape the constraints of whatever was holding him, he found that movement was possible. He shifted from one point to another, wandering listlessly between vessels, a shadowy wraith.

Pebble said fool don't you know a trap when you see one?

At times, his desire to be one with the room almost engulfed him. The longing stemmed from his core and pushed outwards, stretching and warping the flimsy boundary that separated him from his surroundings. He knew that he would eventually buckle, the pressure crashing through him like a tidal wave, allowing him to wash over every surface of the room. He revered and dreaded this future. Like a sinner unwilling to meet his God, he clung to sight, sound and touch, sensations that evidenced his spectral body's continued existence.

It seemed to him that the room was now visible through a slight haze. It was as if each tiny particle in the air caught the light now and again as together they shifted lazily, like the gentle sway of a net curtain in the breeze.

In moments of lucidity, he observed the Administrator, who moved to and fro about the room. In his absence, she had appropriated the office as a private hideaway, slipping away from the busy thoroughfares of company headquarters to go through his collections, organising his objects into groups and arranging them in ways that pleased her. At night, she would smoke and occasionally sneak in lovers.

He observed with detachment, surrendering himself more and more to the ebb and flow of the room.

Pebble said we disappear you.

One morning Cyril lay close to the floor and watched the Administrator as she strode into the room. She was dressed in a tight skirt that tapered out at the knees like a mermaid's tail and complemented the office's pale wallpaper frieze. The sound of her stilettos on the floor accentuated her purposeful stride. For the first time, Cyril was ashamed of his vegetal state, and he slithered into the corner to minimise his presence. The Administrator ignored him. She had a cardboard box in her hands, and she rested this on the desk as she paused to survey his collection. Decided, she lifted the objects one by one into the box, finally holding the lip of it level with the top of the desk to collect the last shards of fabric and rock. She straightened up and with one hand she pressed the container against her torso so it compressed her stomach, creating a gentle bulge around the edges of the box. With the other she brushed her thighs once, briskly. Then she pivoted towards the doorway.

Pebble tried to shout a warning

but her voice got smaller

and smaller

until it was

nothing

at

all.

Cyril listened to the diminuendo of the Administrator's footfall in the corridor. Then, satisfied that he was alone with the room, he shifted his gaze up, to the hanging thing.

It was beautiful, snaking its delicate limbs into the office like an octopus to sew, snake, spin, twist, twist and turn, join knot to curve and make a whole.

He wrapped himself in the willowy mesh and abandoned his body to the ether.

All text by Susie Pentelow