

Pet Shop

The pet shop is tucked amongst the seedy industrial warehouses and fast-food chains, just a turn-and-ten-steps away from the path home. Today, I choose to take the turn-and-ten-steps.

Fish. They're beautiful creatures, elegant and graceful and bold, and in this place, their displays march endlessly along the walls, awash in harsh, glaring light from thrumming fluorescent tubes. Compelled by instinct and habit, I begin my well-practised ritual of solemnly trailing my fingers along the fish labels and gazing with wonder at the inhabitants of each tank.

Fantails, \$20

They're a buoyant, squat and rotund fish, with pearlescent white and orange scales, and large, diaphanous tails that drift in the water like rippling silk. As they waddle up to the glass wall separating them from me, I wonder if they're trying to break free of their prison with the sheer force of indignance.

The shrill shriek of crickets stored in plastic containers grates on my ears. I hurry onto the next tank.

Halfmoon Betta, \$35

He acknowledges me in his usual way, by ambling in my general direction. His fins flick lazily, as if to say, '*sup*. Each time I visit him, I think that he's reached his peak beauty. Each time, I'm proven wrong.

Today, iridescent cerulean scales glimmer like brilliant jewels, and breath-taking fins fan out and ripple magnificently in the water, framing his slender form. I'd love to take him home with me and save him from the aggressive lights and obtrusive humans, but a sticky note informs me that he is 'reserved for Bianca.'

I really hope Bianca treats him well.

Ree-ree-ree-help-mee-mee-meeeee!

The sound of dying cricket comes crashing back. I briskly rub the goosebumps on my arms, and move on.

Feeder Fish, \$3

I used to wonder why this fish was priced so low, and what the care requirements for this species of fish were, until I realised that 'feeder fish' didn't refer to a species at all, but a label for fish unworthy of care and love. They're bred to become the food of other beloved pets. What is the use of keeping them healthy and beautiful, if they're going to be feasted on anyway?

This is reflected in their grey, twisted bodies, their cloudy, infected eyes, their shredded, faded fins, and the despondent way they float, listless and aimless.

I rescued one, once.

She now lives in my community tank and has become a radiant orange-pink, a precious sliver of sunset darting about in my fish tank. I should feel like I did the right thing by rescuing her, but still I wonder if it is really alright for humans to breed creatures like her in the first place.

Living beings born to die.

Behind me, the crickets scream even louder. It's now a nightmarish cacophony in the pet shop.

The hair on the back of my neck has risen and the goosebumps have returned, marching aggressively up my arms.

I hurriedly exit the pet shop, and continue walking home.