

Out of water

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dumped

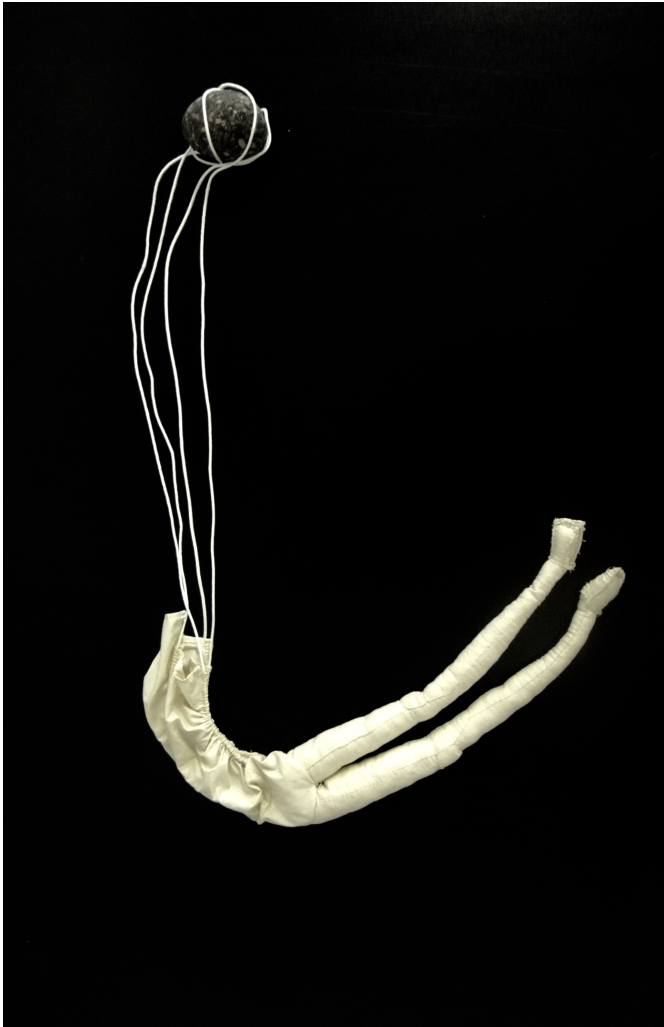
Ten minutes have passed since I got myself washed up on this long beach at the end of the world, with its white sand and tangled line of drying weed. Dumped I am, on the shimmering strand and now hopelessly immobile as I watch from my left eye, the inexorable withdrawal of the tide. It comes to touch me now and then, stretching thin from the wash of a late breaker. It collects in around my feens and as it pulls back, leaves small hollows about my bulk where shallow pools abide. It would be foolish to think these might sustain me. The high tide will not return for twelve hours and by then it will be too late. Very bad luck it is, to be dumped at the peak of the tide.

I watch from my left eye the foam on the waves as they move ever further out, while my right eye remains pressed to the wet sand.

One looking out, one in. My mouth droops open at the corner facing the ground and a thin line of warm saliva slowly trickles from there onto the sand and mixes with the salt water puddle beneath my head where long hair lies in knotted clumps, crusted with sand. This body feels truly enormous – can it be mine? – excessively massive, removed from its watery medium and cast like an unformed heap of matter to be rolled over and inspected, no doubt, to be prodded for signs of life.

I have only ever known the equilibrium that comes from suspension in salt liquid, neither sinking nor floating, but immersed between two surfaces: on one side, the outer limit in constant turbulence with the air, and on the other the grainy bed where oysters and clams forego freedom for security. I've never known the weight of a body, never known the ground, or a sense of up and down. The space of my habitation has remained undetermined, concerning direction, and as a consequence I have never regarded my upper and lower appendages as divided, for example, between thought and action. Feens are not grounded and hins do not flop idly by my sides, or look for things to do. There is no far and near end of me. My torso can fold down over my tail-so and singing is not the exclusive privilege of any single part. It is this that my current dilemma presses upon me,

this new state of determination, of orientation, weightedness. If I am to live, these definitions will be my new masters.



Endlessly moving with the currents, this mass, furthermore, that is mine has never been anything entirely distinct from the mass of the water that supported it. And the water, you could say, has done half my thinking for me, articulating my torso and limb things with great sensitivity and flourish. I had extraordinary friends whose loose and filmy fins were precise images and gauges of the water currents. They revealed to you what you could not see. Yet it must not be construed that they lacked their own volition, these ones; they were not the same as water, yet they shared the thoughts of water in their moving. How I think of them, now that it is clear we will never pass each other again. The days of drifting are past. Already I begin to see these weightless joys fading, withdrawing on the tide. It never occurred to me that there might be a place so savagely indifferent to a body.

Yet in such a place I have come to rest. *Ask nothing more of me for I am done.* Too wasted to sob, I lie here growing infinitely heavy. I am thrice twisted, with the head yanked sideways, torso pressed to the sand and hips rotated adjacent to the ground with my hins and feens in distorted, paralytic gesture. I can just see my fin-gers splaying disjointedly from the right hin, emerging from under my chest in grotesque supplication. I wriggle my tins, right down the far end of me and find there is yet life in these faraway places, and in my shallow

breathing, I find already that my gill slits are closing over and the air is working its way into my lung by an alternate passage. The distraction, not entirely unpleasant, given by a strange new current of air affords me a moment of respite from the disaster.

Yet within the next five minutes the most excruciating stage of my predicament begins, because the drama is passed and I am now aware that the waiting and slow changes and adjustments have only just begun. This is where I start to reflect on the circumstances of what has befallen me, how I got to be here, what it was that just occurred. After only fifteen minutes, my drama has fallen into history; it is now ripe for interpretation, which was not the case while that terrible thing was happening, as I was scraping along the sand in the quick shallows, as I felt myself exposed to the brutalities of sun and air, and this settling into mass. So many new things were happening in that moment of crisis, it did not occur to me that it was either good or bad, right or wrong. My body struggled against it, as a body will. But in the tussle I felt feverishly alive. In that event there was no past or future to consider and in my thrashing I found out about joints and stores of energy that had been hidden and laid idle until then. There was no time or place to consider what this situation could mean, or how the terms by which I had learnt to live would exhaust themselves in the fray and change forever. The struggle to regain the water and

resist the shore called upon the same nerves and muscles that would be required for living without it.

But now that I have come to rest and the crisis has moved on to a kind of tedium, the event recedes into the past, into a distance. Although I now am able to examine it, at the same time it loses something of its force and clarity and I cannot help thinking terrible thoughts. Mostly, I am seized by the dreadful conviction that there has been no accident, that I was not unlucky. Rather, it seems unavoidable that the sea expelled me, and that this expulsion was deliberate and final.

It is far, far away now, the sea. Beyond the shallow mound that extends between me and the water line I can no longer see it, so complete is its withdrawal. The rumble I hear is new to my senses because the sound of water from within its depths is rounder, crystal clear, less torn, more like a melody than this groaning whisper that it has become. Fifteen minutes on shore has delivered me a lifetime of difference and I must adjust smartly and quickly if I am to survive, or expire right here and now and spare the agony of gradual suffocation.



Prince

As Prince of the realm, I consider it my entitlement to eat as I wish, and marry whom and what it pleaseth me if the whom or what be pleas-ed too. So when they brought me this withered lot from the shore beneath the cliffs, already barnacled and sparkling with a salty crust, I thought to myself: *do I eat it, or do I wed it?*

I had taken my meal already that evening, and to be honest, it was not an appetising specimen I looked down upon, though food from the sea seldom is. Last month they brought me a Black Scabbard fish, six feet in length and so terrifying in toothy countenance with the sleek, serpentine body of an eel, that I was sure we had been delivered an omen from the sea. Both the fisherman and the kitchen insisted this be a necessary intermediate stage between the fingerling

and the table and so I let them cook it and serve it. They did so with considerable flare, and the golden crust of crispy batter was a far cry from the tar slick skin and horrible grin that had shielded this happier side. Delicious though it was, however, I could not expunge the image of that creature, glaring at me with its dreadful eye, daring me to eat it, for clearly I would not wed it.

This new creature freshly delivered croaked at me through cracked lips, a word that might have been its name. It was unclear, a sickly gurgle from a deep pipe, a rattle from a sack of cockles, a rasping, breathy hum that made no sense. *Find out about this fish, bring me its name*, I demanded those who stood and gawped, and off they went dutifully, to the library, the liturgy, the laboratory to find its name. I had it dressed, for the creature was naked, apart from the kelp wrapped about its limb things. I had it laid out on a well-made bed, had its hair managed, had its fowl breath treated with lime juice; had the barnacles removed from its fingernails and teeth and had them prepare it a simple warm broth which it drank heartily. The next morning it had flopped from the bed to the floor, discarded the clothes it had been given and flapped about on the chilly marble like a squid. I will neither eat nor marry it.

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Unfortunately, I am advised it is my affair since I had it brought. Did I? How did it happen? I glanced from my window out to the horizon, watching a ship – it is what a prince might do – then the thing on the deserted shore – *because* it was deserted – caught my eye and so I looked at it. That is all I did, but it seems this was the clincher. I looked and could not be indifferent for it commanded me, pathetic though it was – *because* it was pathetic – though I am a prince and it an abject heap. *Go prod it for life*, I commanded my man. But nowhere did I say, *bring it back!* Yet bring it they did, up the cliffs on a fragile stretcher, this disorganised life form, if ever I saw one, a pile of washed up flotsam. And now it seems, according to the same salvage codes that brought me silver and mahogany last year, it is mine. Just from casting my eye too close to the shore, just by looking down when a sensible man would have looked up, I am now the foster parent of Neptune's spawn!

I shall pen a letter.

Dear Aunt P,

I trust you are well. I was quite well until ... no, where should I begin? There is this thing... there is, you might call it, a Mer-thing. If it weren't so quite person-like in its face and proportions, I would say, fish. However, it cannot be ignored, Aunt P, that what we have here is a matter neither of fish nor of man, but rather, of science. I believe it is female. I am sure you would discover a great deal to excite your marvellous mind, Aunt P given an opportunity to spend some time with it. I am not in a position to care for this child-woman-fish-monster. As you know, I have affairs of state that fill my time beyond capacity and though I recognise the wonderful gift I have been personally delivered, I could not give it the attention it requires. You, Aunt, have a reputation for healing, caring and, no small matter, naming. Did you not raise from the near dead a wild cat last year and tame it so that now it is capable of doing small chores around the place as well as handle minor administrative work? Or am I confusing that with another orphaned creature. In any case, your remedies are well known and the greatest regret I have in my otherwise fortunate career, is that I did not inherit some of your earthly wisdom, and forge something akin to your alliance with the natural world. In short Aunt P, I have arranged for this package,

well washed and finely dressed, to be delivered to you. It will be dispatched this afternoon and should arrive at your door the day after tomorrow. I ask that you be there to accept delivery.

I thank you and love you in advance and rely on your insight and wisdom to initiate the treatment of this unholy specimen, that it might live in the world of men without causing others the horror and confusion it has, in a single day, afforded your ever loving nephew.

Yours in debt and gratitude,

Prince G.

P

If you are a prince, young Gaspard, I am a three-eyed Gorgon. You would think, Veya, that he might show the gods a bit of gratitude for serving him up some flesh and blood phantasm for a change, but instead he discharges it to me. What is it to be, do you suppose, this stonefish, scabbard, mussel, mer-thing? We shall wait and see, it is all we can do. But why send a thing of the salt water to this clear stream mountain country? We scarcely have salt enough for the table let alone for the bath.

And he said they dressed it. Dressed it finely! He has not the means to dress himself much less a fish, not the means at all Veya! For starters, he owes me twenty-five hundred and I don't suppose I shall ever see that again! Last time I saw Gaspard, he was dressed in a

burlap tunic, playing with a cardboard tuck. But when was that? Seventeen years ago! Now he is a prince he says. What does that make me? So be it, if it is to be.

(Am I old yet Veya, do you see in me the signs of history; do I smell like an old lunch, a worn out book, medicine jars? Don't laugh Veya dear. Those yellow eyes of yours! Do you see me smell me hear me in decay or just in abeyance? Perhaps this new charge will do us good. Let us go dig for sweet potatoes.)

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I heard someone calling last night.

She has been with me one week now and still I do not know her name, or whether she possesses one. I cannot say if it is the uncertainty of her species or the uncertainty of her name that haunts me most. Or that she is unaccountably familiar. I am struck by the infinity of her, *as long as she remains on the other side of words.*

She eats everything I give her and forages for more during the day. She has found fresh stream yabbies and has a talent for catching them. She walks as one who has just learnt and trips over many little

things so I am constantly clearing sticks away from the yard. I saw her legs, covered in sores and scabs, and not yet much more than the scaly spindles she arrived on. Soon I will offer to apply some creams and presses if she will have them. She is showing signs of trust toward me, looks into my face with her round keen, green eyes, and this morning over breakfast she touched my arthritic knuckle. Her arms are weak and I will not ask anything of her for now. I learn more by watching than by testing. I do not yet love her, but may come to this.

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Somebody called up the stairs, up the slope, again last night. *Aya*, something like that, but drawn out, like a bird call. *Ayyyy-ya*. Who is there? No reply. Into the space that the voice had filled, rushed the wind and a curlew.

So *Aya* it has become, because of a possible error in my hearing, and now I live between two rhyming individuals, *Veya* and *Aya*. They are not unlike. *Gaspard* calls *Veya* a wild cat, though she never was that. She appeared in my garden one fine day, in the way a new flower appears, having bided its time before the timely revelation of its marvels. It arrives as an idea, dreamed into the world by the garden and, in any case, this is how it seemed to be with *Veya*, and now this

new one. The new one came from *Gaspard*, but it was as though a space, precisely her shape and size, had been vacant, and now has been warmed by her. I did not tame them, but they took what they needed, and this taking came to include my company and my attention. *Veya*, the name, arrived on the same mishearing of a night cry by which I now know my mysterious charge from the sea: *Aya*.

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Each day you are less fish and more woman. The salves have softened the scaly skin and poultices have alleviated boils and helped close up open wounds. Your hands are moving freely and you have learned to breath well. You have untied all the knots in my fish net and reduced it to a pile of string. So be it, if it is to be. Lately, you have found my old guitar and will not let it go. (Not to say that she plays it, but lays it across her lap like a zither and pushed the back of her thumbnail up and down the steel wound strings, making a frantic whirring sound. She puts her ear to the strings and listens closely. Then she weeps. Worse than this, she tries not to weep and with all her might bites her lip until it bleeds. Then she sucks on the salty tears and blood as they combine on her mouth. It is with such vigour and attention she does this, that these symptoms of whatever grief she has, are simultaneously relieved by their own delightful qualities.)

I will talk about her hands, for I held them the other day. I took her to my big chest of drawers and opened the lowest one. There were table cloths, pillow slips and empty perfume bottles and old fashioned handkerchiefs still folded in their boxes, and an unopened present and a box with brooches and a silver fork set and a bronze medal with ribbons and there was a photograph album and a tool kit and a sewing kit and box of hair ornaments and a silk rope and a silver whistle and a wooden recorder and a diary and a set of old touring maps and a bar of soap in an ornamental tin and a pair of ceramic salt and pepper shakers in the form of angel fish. She reached for these. *Fish*, I said, *fins*. When, after pressing the cold, smooth objects to her mouth, she put them back and I handed her the fern scented soap, placed it in her hands and kept a hold. *Hands* I said. *Hins* she replied.

cave

I have learned to dream, to have a different life in the water-air of sleep and this is something new; without doubt, the greatest advantage of living in the weight world is the possibility of dreams. In the sea, life is an agreement between the water and the body and allows for no second life; no meaning lies hidden in images beneath this first and final contract. In there, I had no conflict with with my housing; it did not cause me to look up to the stars or dig down through layers. You do not dream of flight when you are weightless. You do not crave to be fed, when your food floats easily into your open mouth. If you are not being chased, the absence of resistance from every direction, the absence of difference between mind and medium puts you in no position to wonder.

But here, they long for other things, other places, other ways of being.
Here you find a second life, and you are led to dream.

Tonight I walked up the slope that leads away into the forest and boulder country behind the house. These rocks are weightier even than I, but they do not look outward and they do not dig down but silently hold their breath, encased in infinity. Though in appearances they are not at all like the sea, I can feel their depths even from the outside. I press my ear to their smooth surfaces and detect a great distance. Further up the slope, the boulders start to join into walls, rooved over by earth and offering increasingly narrow passage. I arrive at an opening beyond which there is no light, and enter by touch.

In here the air grows cold and damp. The smells of earth mingle with those of moisture. The sound of dripping water, the light of glow worms; I brush by a root and a pillar of stone. My foot touches an edge and reaches down for the next level but meets no resistance. No resistance under foot and so I let go, the second foot falling away from its step as soon as my weight spills over its axis. And then I am falling. After seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, I arrive at water and still I continue down, now moving slower and pushed along by a current.

Then through the water surface I see the night sky and make a break for it. Of all the stars that sparkle down to the horizon and continue in reflections across the water's surface, or all the shining ripples and broken shards of the moon's elongated reflection, two small lights seem to be moving toward me.

Alternately I gulp for air and water, and alternately I choke on them. Which is it to be, for it cannot be both? Those two lights, side by side, elevated above me, grow closer, and I pull myself through the water toward them, unafraid, incurious, unhurried. They grow closer and they are low in the water. They grow closer...

and then I am lifted, for I am a small fish, and then I am lifting, for I am a man, an un-finned man, a left handed man, a female man, knee deep holding a small fish that wriggles and slips away, the smallest splash as it lands back in the water. And I am swimming away and I am walking to shore.

