

Rapture of the Deep

Surfacing. He knows, before he even opens his eyes, he's late. He pushes a cat off the sweat-soaked bed and rummages on the floor for yesterday's clothes. Stumbling on a bag from the hilly region of luggage yet unpacked, he hops into his shorts and pulls a t-shirt over his head, nauseated by the smell of stale sweat. Already it's hot, but it's the humidity that's making his head throb. That, and the hangover. He opens the blind to find a thong and the light floods in through a film of smoke, as though through water. Dizzy and disoriented, he closes them again.

He clears a space on the sugar-cruised bench for his cup, pours in cheap instant coffee and clumpy sugar and fills it with hot water from the tap. He adds the last of the milk, ignoring the white flotsam floating on top, and nukes it for a minute. The pervasive odour of forgotten prawn shells is warm and biotic in his nostrils. He crams the bag in the freezer making room amongst the others. Even the freezer smells like prawns. He pushes his nose into the cup and drinks in the bittersweet smell.

Down at the mudflats, the boat's still docked but everyone's aboard. Dawn is unhooking the rope from the pylon. The tourists, mostly girls, are braced like seagulls dotting the deck. As he approaches he hears the familiar mix of foreign accents, Dutch or German, he can't yet tell. He clambers on board before disappearing behind a group of Japanese girls being snapped by an old woman. Later he will coax squeals from them, but it's early still and his head feels thick and tangled.

Sick from engine fumes, he longs to be out at sea already, the fresh, salty air clearing his thoughts; but for now, the warm, sleepy smell of tourists sweating alcohol, and the sounds of Enya, are suffocating.

Dawn is chasing him, her eyes little flints that spark every time she sees him. He threads his way through the clusters of tourists speaking broken English. The boat lurches over a wave, hovers and drops. The tourists tumble and squeal. He grabs five of the cream-filled biscuits, fills a mug with some milk and goes out on the deck. The drone of the engine is inescapable. He turns his face to the sun, the wind wrapping

around him and drowning out all sounds. He fixes his gaze to where the sea and sky meet, closes his eyes, and he is already there.

‘I expect everyone to be punctual.’

‘Sorry, Darlin’. It won’t happen again.’

‘You’ve said that before.’

‘I promise.’

She cocks her head and her twitchy lips are shut as tight as a clam.

‘You’re still on trial.’

‘I know.’

‘And I expect everyone to wear sho--’

And he turns to the sun, and a gust of wind tears her words away and his laugh follows them.

Sticky heat, heavy with humidity. The air is thick and lifeless. He slips into the cool water, feels himself melt. He spits in his mask and coats the inside.

‘This stops it fogging up,’ he says, swilling it out.

The old woman only pretends to spit.

They follow him in single file to the nearest bommie, a coral-covered outcrop, home to the devil-horned boxfish. Taking turns to feel the leathery skin of a sea cucumber, they pass it on like a game of hot potato as it squirts its sticky glue. He shows them crayfish in the cracks and crevices and points to a massive ball of parrot fish rolling along the coral, one over the other, rasping off the algae as they tumble along. He imagines they’re caught in a vortex. That their life is part of a ball that rolls on forever, forever chomping on the coral floor.

On the way back to shore, the passengers drink sparkling wine, and their conversation is sparkly too. The sun that witnessed all the promise of the day still beams. He sits at the stern on the windward side and looks out, not at the expanse of sea but of sky - of infinite nothingness, a void that can’t be filled; his thoughts compress.

So much water in him, it seeps out at night, leaks from his pores and drenches the sheets. He sits in the dark, the world still and silent as the ocean, sucking on a

cigarette that flashes like a beacon. The cat mews intermittently, nudging at his leg. In the depths of the night, pressurised thoughts become a toxic liquid swimming through his system, poisoning his mind. Like nitrogen narcosis. He daren't dive down deeper. The beacon flashes through the night until the pull of tomorrow draws him to bed. He hunts for a dry towel but they're all spotted with mould and smell faintly of mushrooms. He lies down between clammy-cool sheets, rolls on his side, knots his arms and dissolves into sleep.

Running to the wharf, he remembers what it was like to wake up on the boat when he was trolling for mackerel off the gulf, having dreamt of such mundane things as walking to the shops to buy milk, talking to the shopkeeper. Having spent almost half his life at sea, only now he feels adrift. He misses the Morning Glories - great spaghetti clouds rolling off the land only to dissipate over the water. He misses waking up on the boat, day after day, and falling asleep night after night. But most of all he misses the solitude.

A mirror beneath him, the sea and sky are one. The boat barely bobbing on slow, broad, undulating waves, no ripples, no breaks and not a breath of wind. He has a sense of being caught in a daydream; neither here nor there but somewhere in between. Down in the foscle he leans on the hull, the cold steel cooling his blood. He presses his ear to it, listening for the clicks and squeals of dolphins.

'Okay,' he says, circling his fingers into a ring.

He is demonstrating the underwater hand signals to group two - the ones Dawn thinks will pull out or panic. They copy his gestures and make circles with their fingers, among them a wisp of a girl with dandelion hair and wide-set, faraway eyes.

'Look,' he says, two fingers pointing at his eyes like a snake in a staring contest.

They copy with enthusiasm, one young boy almost poking out his own.

'Problem' he says, his hand jelly-wobbly, and their hands wobble along with his.

He slashes his finger across his throat, 'Out of air.'

They stand aghast. She holds her hands to her face in feigned terror.

The sun makes her look as if she has a golden lining.

In the water she clings to him like a barnacle, her frantic octopus arms encircling his waist, her legs intertwined with his. He pries them off only to have them grip and tighten again. Even after he has disentangled himself, he can feel the bubbles from her regulator through his hair as they work their way down the rope.

He knows of a better reef, a little further away with a cleaning station and soft coral. Here, a red bass waits while two tiny wrasse clean the parasites from inside its mouth and gills and from its scales. The smaller fish remind him of the elaborate lures he had used to catch the mackerel, which he would painstakingly prepare and tassel, taking up to an hour for each one. He shows them a large moon-shaped rock, half-buried in the sand, blanketed in polyps dancing around like little florets, where later, much later, he will trace *I love you* with his finger.

He is yet to know her name.

Seaweed-limp, she flops herself on deck like she's been swallowed and spat out. Wrung out and blown dry, she springs to life again.

Her faraway eyes make him wish he could play the guitar.

Lying beside her on the grassy mudflats, under a squid-ink sky, he wishes he knew some dazzling fact about the stars. She kisses him anyway.

As frantic in bed as she is in the water, her tentacles wrap around him.

She calls the cat Tibbles.

In the morning she is gone.

Late again, he digs around in a bag for a dry t-shirt, making do with a singlet. He sticks her number to the TV screen with chewed-up gum stuck to a mug of yesterday's coffee. He nukes the coffee and takes out the prawns.

He bounds on board just as Dawn is tying the rope off at the cleat.

'Mornin' Darlin'.'

'Where are your shoes?'

'I haven't found 'em yet.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Almost two weeks.'

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‘How can you go two weeks--’

‘Don’t need ’em,’ he says, knocking on a woody sole.

He takes the more experienced divers to a deeper part of the reef, further along. Swimming between bommies, the pure white sand is rippled like the desert, by the tides instead of winds. And, like the desert, there are no markers. After seven minutes, he knows he’s lost his way. Water like aspirin fizzing in a glass, bubbling with air and murky with sediment swirls. He feels the sting of a swarm of blubber jellyfish before he sees them, hundreds and hundreds, floating, hovering, surrounding them. His eyes close as they engulf him, rocking and swaying on a watery bed, bubble-gum ads and a missing thong. A blanket wrapping around him.

Sea legs, land legs, golden brown and bare, walk away in pairs to entwine that night. His thoughts become heavy. The weight of words. She is waiting at the wharf, a whisper in boots.

‘These’ she says, as she spins around in her fluttery dress waving two lengths of vacuum hose, ‘are my angelic whirly pipes.’

He stifles the urge to laugh.

‘Listen,’ she says, spinning one and then the other.

They begin to hum softly.

‘I wish I was a bird or a kite or even a balloon...’

She spins them faster and the notes get higher and louder.

‘...just to feel what it’s like to fly. One day I think the wind’s going to whisk me off somewhere...’

With her flyaway hair and only heavy boots to ground her, waving pipes like the robot from *Lost in Space*, he imagines her floating away on the string of a balloon.

He plunges his hands deep in his back pockets.

‘Sometimes, when I’m diving and the water’s just right...’ he says, watching his toes curl around a stone. ‘...like blood warm. You know when it’s so dark, you don’t know if your eyes are open or closed...’

He lifts his head and throws back his shoulders, pushing his hands deeper in his pockets.

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‘Sometimes I feel like that. Like I don’t know where my body ends and the water begins.’

He checks the Master’s manifest of souls on board as the boat pitches under churning, slate skies. The stiff waves are shards of glass, whipped into points so sharp and jagged they could cut. The goonie birds and seagulls circle a dark patch that bubbles like it’s boiling from the frenzy beneath. Padded and constricted, he straps the cumbersome tank to his back, runs through the capabilities assessment - strength, confidence, ability - sums up the risks, and they prepare to dive.

The flicks and flashes of baitfish are mesmerising, swishing and scudding past reef sharks and rays. A giant clam nestles in the sand like a treasure chest that has sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Diving down to the darkest of greens, he peers into the blackness beyond.

As solid as a thought compressed.

She fills the emptiness with words and songs and laughter. And when the songs run out and the things to say, she fills it with sighs and screams and sobs and silence.

At night there’s a sucking sound, a kind of ‘glup’ when he tries to free himself from her suction-hold. He sits in the glow of an infomercial, sucking on a cigarette and scratching his salt-tingly skin.

‘Come back to bed,’ she murmurs, rubbing a sleepy hand over the sheet.

As though through a screen of muffled sounds and seltzer vision, murky with suspended sediment and words left unsaid,

‘We don’t have to sleep.’

Dank sheets, stinging skin, he tosses on a sea of sleeplessness. Nitrous thoughts - a kind of rapture of the night.

He hears the chomping of the parrot fish rolling over the coral.

Even on land he can’t escape the water.

She is zipping up her boots.

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‘Why’re you leaving?’

She pauses to look at him, and he knows he should say more.

‘At least wait till morning.’

‘I’ll call you,’ she says.

The door closes softly, so softly, behind her. Like so many tourists’ hats, she is lost on the wind.

Cold coffee, no coffee, running to the dock. Liquid thoughts turning to gas and evaporating on the surface of the water. Water cellophane crackly, or so still it looks as though it will shatter, and slice, or sometimes you will dissolve. And always the parrot fish are tumbling, tumbling, crunching on the coral as they roll endlessly along.

She is there, at the wharf, her hair now short and spiky.

‘You look different.’

‘I’m an Aries now.’

‘Oh. I didn’t know you could do that.’

She laughs softly.

‘It’s all scientific. You can’t just switch.’

He nods as though he understands.

‘I like your hair.’

‘Do you?’ She touches her neck where her hair used to fall.

‘I liked it *better* before.’

A sheet of steel under a bluestone-heavy sky.

Standing on deck, he can shake off the night and finally breathe. He listens for the sound of angelic pipes through the whistling wind but it’s as hollow as an empty seashell.

The boat pushes through the water, against the squally wind that drowns the tourists’ screams. It lurches and hovers and drops and stops and stalls and starts and gains momentum and he feels like he’s flying, towards his destination, breathless, blinking, a dog with its head out a window.

Giggles, shouts, a man’s deep laugh. Vaporous thoughts. The water like quicksilver, he slips in like you might slip into bed, exhausted, good for nothing but sleep, only

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half awake, slipping into sleep, sliding into quicksilver, diving into dreams.

The water feels just right today.