

What She Gave to the Sea

by Katrina Denza

1.

There's a young woman in a nightclub seated next to a window out of which she watches the slow descent of snow, illuminated by strategic lights. She imagines herself falling with those flakes. Her friend has left her for the dance floor. The young woman is seated, yet if you look closely, you can see the exertion caused by the desperate desire to run from her own skin.

A man joins her table. By his scent of dead fish and sunken ships, the phosphorescence under his nails, she guesses the man can only be Poseidon. She smiles and offers herself.

2.

There's a young woman in Poseidon's bed. Stretched-out, naked, she'd like to believe he's taken with her long limbed boy-body and earnest face; she tells herself this is so. At dinner he complimented the way she said the word scallop—soft “ah” sound, not a crass short “a.” In bed, he studies her body and declares it an unfinished sculpture, the lines and curves being too undefined. Life will finish you, he tells her.

Three months later Poseidon holds the young woman's face against his chest, and rubbing circles on her back, laments the quality of conversation. She's too unformed to be interesting, but it's been lovely, he says.

3.

There's a young woman sitting at a table with Poseidon. Neither has touched the pile of fried clams between them. The other patrons of the restaurant are blind to the seaweed he's brought in on his shoes, only the young woman knows who he is. She teases the wine with her tongue, then tells him she's three months late. Pensive, he chews on the end of his trident. He sits straighter, coughs. Do you want me to marry you, he offers. Yes, she thinks. And then she remembers how seawater captured inside a jar begins to smell after a while. No, she says.

4.

There's a young woman lying on her back surrounded by white light and frantic tones. She dreams of men in blue coats drawing a line on her belly with a knife, of one of the men slipping his hand in and scooping out mermaid purses by the fistful. The purses lie wet and cold against her chest.

Pearls of milk fall to the floor, unnecessary. The young woman crawls toward the edge of the bed and dives into a sea. She opens her mouth to curse Poseidon, but her mouth fills with water; she cannot speak and there is no one to hear. The sea feels as empty as her body.

5.

There's a young woman locked in a room made of stone. Ten years it's taken her to build this room. A crone visits every day. Mornings, she knocks on the young woman's door with the tip of a cane. Don't you want to see her? the crone implores. She tells the young woman the time has come for her to acknowledge what she gave away. If she doesn't, her gift will be lost forever to a world without light and heat, a watery world without substance. The young woman cups her hands against her ears and begs the woman to leave her alone.

6.

There's a woman in love with a mortal. They marry and live on a hill close to the sun and far from the sea. Whenever doubts swim around her like hungry sharks, she thinks of how this mortal hacked at the stone until it crumbled and fell away. She holds this truth tight against her solar plexus. Every day, the mortal offers her revision, and with his eyes, she sees the lines of her body have become softer-edged, less defined. Poseidon wasn't right about anything. Life has not finished her.

The mortal's hand on hers, the two of them rub circles on the woman's belly. It grows round and high with life. Eventually, two yellow-haired sun children emerge and the four of them live in an ebullient light far from the sea.

7.

There's a woman haunted by the smell of salt air. It trails after her sun children, lingers in the corners of her house in their absence. The woman spends her days on her hands and knees, trying to chase away the odor with lemony bleach.

The mortal loves her, and he is a good man, but even his patience is finite. He tells her she's wasting her time searching for discarded things. Redemption comes in the letting go, he insists. The thought of redemption strangles me, she says.

8.

There's an old woman standing at the edge of a sea. Salty froth covers her thin, hollowing feet. The sea greets the woman with each pressing wave. It taunts: she's here, she's here; your sacrifice is here. The woman fears the sea is not lying. She fears Poseidon stole what was hers all along.

The old woman walks into the water, its iciness crawls up her flesh with each step. A pod of dolphins play near the line where sky and water touch.

She whispers to the gray deep: Poseidon, show yourself.

