heavy the sea

esther teichmann
It had been dark for several days now; 
day turned to night and night to day without 
there ever appearing to be but brief 
glimpses of light, flashing momentarily. 
The skies rolled by furiously, swelling in 
a strange twilight, crashing in waves that 
burst into pouring showers. Water ran 
in tiny rivers, steam rising upon impact.

I come here almost every day — the glass 
roof amplifying the raindrops, comforting 
in their dramatic overtures. At least 
the weather seems to hear me, the rage, 
the grief.

Inside and outside collide here, within this 
forgotten corner of the city. Birds fly in 
and out of the tipped panels — only the 
black blue sky and a blurry grey outline 
of the city visible through the sweating, 
dripping glass.

The orchids, ferns and palms, with their 
Latin names on carefully placed signs, 
bloom proudly, oblivious to their lack 
of audience. I sound out these unfamiliar 
words, forgetting them as soon as they 
form a shape in my mouth. The air is so 
thick here it feels solid, acrid, sharing the 
vegetation’s breath. The silent statues 
look on with their artificially dismembered 
limbs, copies of gods and goddesses from 
another time.

Stretched out Christs in the hundreds 
drape the walls of the adjacent museum — 
gaping mouths, silent cries. Pain veiled 
and unveiled in burnt gold, petrol, umber, 
the same story told and retold. Walking 
through these empty rooms to get to the 
glasshouse, silent guards sit immobile 
at every corner as though cast, or carved, 
echoing the bodies they protect.

Presumably this could go on forever, this 
wandering, the emptiness, the iron taste 
of apathy that coats my tongue.

Language will return eventually, I know 
this, remember the last time, recall the 
dragging of feet, the pain along my spine, 
the flood of dread upon waking. This prior 
knowledge, this bodily remembering, 
this physical infidelity in the repetition 
of mourning, brings no relief. What was 
automated just last week, is now a complex 
chain of actions, requiring a will I no 
longer possess.

The black of the storms have folded into 
night and the caretaker is locking each 
section of the glasshouse, maintaining 
their different temperatures and humidities.

A girl at school had stopped speaking. 
Did not speak for years. Maybe whispering 
these words, reading the names of plants 
imported by an emperor, is an attempt to 
stop language leaving entirely. Grief takes 
hold anew each day, as though the fall of 
sleep withdraws all memory, and every day 
upon waking you die again and I with you.

Like a knife he is lodged inside me. 
I read these words somewhere.

Days spent in saunas, steam rooms, the 
world disintegrating in water vapour. Here 
within these other glasshouses, I lie back 
into the burning heat. This self-induced 
fainting, this willful drowning, delivers the 
delirium of falling away, of dissolving. — rv
Photogen was born into bright full moon light.

One of three Hesperides the daughters of the night.

The middle girl, mouth large and finely curved crescent moon-smile.

Legs pumping up and down on the pedals of her bike, a village in the arms of the Black Forest a lake ice cream all clean.

She knew the lake so well that she pedalled pedalled pedalled around and around and around its very pretty edges with her eyes shut tight.

She's a bicycle girl. Shaken by Bataille's Simone pleased by Proust's Albertine.

If not, winter. Photogen basked in the full splendour of the sun until she could bear more of it than any dark-blooded African and resisted being dressed again.

As she grew, Photogen's eyes grew darker and darker.

Until they were as dark as vespers as black as apples.

Nycteris was born under a full moon shrouded in gloomy Mombasa cloud.

His Taita mother fed him black milk and wine as dark as carbuncle and pomegranates and purple grapes and birds that dwell in marshy places.

At boarding school Nycteris developed his boyish charm convincing younger boys that it was truly an honour to iron his white shirts crisp to polish his black shoes shiny.

And it was.
Nycteris’s skin
darkened silver
the purest tint and grain.

Nycteris’s helical hair
whirls
scrolls
holds tight
like tiny black fists.

Nycteris’s mouth
less beautiful,
if more lovely,
from sadness.

Nycteris’s eyes
stop short
only
of being too large.

He’s a pretty boy.
Tinted
with Persephone
stained
with Antigone.

A sweet sorrow
perfumes his air
like flowers in the night.

Like a night-blooming cereus
blooming just once a year
and only
at night.

Like the strained slow click of Photogen’s camera shutter.

When Photogen
first
watched him
bloom
that night
under a bower of ferns
bougainvillea
orchids
her soul was penetrated by light
(ning).

The measured motion
so extended,
hers mind lost in dreaminess
in following it.

’Had the last petal moved?’

With that.
Photogen’s pupils became mydriatic
(two black moons).

Photogen gazed within
took her fill
of stamen and pistil.

And there is Photogen
waiting.

Like the sweet apple turning black
on the top of the topmost branch,
and he did not notice it.
rather,
he did notice.
but could not reach up to take it.
**sleeping beauty underwater**

Oh how easy it is, 
at first.

The branches of coral, 
part like thighs 
and the sticky leaves of seaweed 
lick 
his cheeks 
and his lips 
like tongues 
pleasingly rough

a taste of seawater molasses.

He plunges deeper into her underwater coral thicket 
cylindrical tubes trembling 
beneath 
undulating waters

The coral calyces take alarm 
their petals re-enter 
their cases 
and 
right before his eyes turn to stony 
knobs.

Out of touch 
wrapped in seaweed 
ribbons of silk loosely entwine 
rump and thighs

water life fabric 
like water in water 
puddles at your feet 
mermaid tails for the street

**Underwater Sleeping Beauty**

subaquatic Briar Rose 
one hundred years ago 
and 20,000 leagues under 
you fell into a kind of somnolence 
in the middle of an oceanic 
dream.

One hundred years later 
while swimming at the bottom of the sea

I found you.

And

I whispered into your ear what you had forgotten.

And

you awakened with open eyes; swept clean.

And

you swam away, weightless with desire.

Nothing more than 
your own reflection in the water.

Andre Breton

Wendy Ligon Smith
A giant camera stands on the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea. She walks into its dark belly, eyes adjusting to the change in light. The lens in the center of its conical roof focuses the image outdoors onto a mirror, projecting it upon the concave circular dish in the room’s middle. The eggshell-lacquered projection bowl now holds the most exquisite image - tiny crystalline waves break silently over jagged cliffs, water droplets spray in minute detail.

Its circumference would fit a curled-up body almost exactly. She could sleep here, waves crashing upon skin, dancing across eyelids, covering her with their continual circular motion. She will come back here one day and he will stand behind her. Together they will inhale the image in silence, breath suspended, waiting for that moment when the late afternoon sun hits mute waves, flooding everything inside her in an overexposed glow of too much light.

He comes to her room, above the cliffs and the sea, surrounded by a thick jungle garden. She tastes her saltiness in his mouth, the taste of the ocean, the sweet smell of swamps. Deep-sea diving, eyes open, swimming from luminous turquoise into dark blue, towards almost black waters. Unafraid, she swims down, through ocean caves, under waterfalls, no longer needing to breathe, past and with all the women who are a part of her. The soft downy hair of his armpit feels like the cradle next to her mother’s breast in which her head still fits exactly.

She wraps herself around him the way she and her sisters used to sleep entwined - no longer homesick. He sleeps arms outstretched as though crucified, wrists upturned, chest exposed. She watches him, tracing his veins with her eyes, until they disappear beneath flesh, thinking of the bodies that have been as familiar as his is becoming, the strangeness of intimacy.

Her gaze falls upon the fractal scar beginning at the base of his throat, in that soft indentation between two arteries. From this tender point it spreads out and down like the finest of seaweed, fossilized upon him in one violent moment. Touching his lightning scar, reading the strange map etched into him. It glistens a coral pink, like the inside of the seashell she holds to her ear, listening to the ocean to fall asleep. She keeps a thicker kind of seaweed in the bath, the brackish salty smell reaching her boat-bed when a breeze moves across the room. She keeps these washed up branches of slippery leather, so as to bathe within their drowned mermaids’ embrace, lowering herself into their tentacles as he sleeps oblivious, a few feet away. –evt

**FRACTAL SCARS, SALT WATER AND TEARS**
She wakes to find herself within the moon's spotlight, a warm breeze moving across them. Breaking waves echo rhythmically, curtains billowing a strange dance.

They arrived late in the night too tired to drive on, a journey without destination or end. Days of driving through winding rainforest roads, warm afternoon rain lashing against the steamed-up windshield. She slides from under his arms, holding her breath. Slipping out, she closes the door softly.

The moon seems larger, closer to earth – everything feels alive in this too bright night. Her mother had told her she had been born at full moon, the maternity ward so crowded babies were delivered in hallways. She imagines the symphony of cries like baying wolves, the moonshine bathing bulging stomachs and writhing, blood-soaked-pink flesh in opalescent blues.

Still warm cement turns to sand as she runs towards glittering waves, eyes never leaving their hypnotizing call. One long inhale calms the cold sting of their crashing against shins, then thighs. Slowed only for a moment, she dives into blackness. A perfect arch with a force much greater than her body usually allows. Hurtling into and through dark water, everything inside her breathes with strength and relief. She swims down and away from land, eyes open, seeing nothing, saltwater entering every pore. Life swirls beneath and around her, invisible to human eyes. And then the depths push against her, releasing her to the light above. Held firmly in the sea’s grasp, she bathes in the moon’s glow.

Something is shifting, changing. Waters churn faster, a low rumbling rising from a far off place. Black clouds plunge this otherworldly stage into momentary darkness, their edges of deep cyan and petrol blue, backlit as the spotlight re-emerges.

Low groaning escalates into distant cracks of thunder. Silvers of light flash with a precision and force that betray their seeming delicacy. She thinks of his scar, of the almost ecstatic joy spreading across his face as he told her of the night he swam in lightning.

The rolling waves turn violently, breaking rhythm, no longer a gentle embrace. She should leave now, return to the rapidly diminishing shore, come back to her body, her separateness, lie beside him as though she had never left. Reluctance lingers and she hesitates too long. Raised up and recaptured, dragged under by a raging weight, her body sags, resistance futile. Every part of her is penetrated, pummelled by the howling sea. Seaweed strangles and binds her limbs. She gives in to the fury, knowing only then will it release her.

The skies turn upside down and as suddenly as she had found herself drowning, she is now expelled, thrown towards land. She lies motionless, half submerged, eyes closed, returning slowly. Rain pours down, washing the salt away. And still it clings to her, seaweed in hair, Medusa writhing.

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