

Upwelling

By

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Upwelling

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Abstract

My thesis consists of the first three chapters of *Upwelling*, a literary fantasy novel examining the intersection of relationships, power, and storytelling through the narrative of a mermaid coming to live on land. The manuscript is a contested document; three narrators each present versions of the central story and, to varying extents, comment on each other's interpretations. These early chapters primarily recount the mermaid protagonist's background and the formation of her relationships, both in the sea with fellow merfolk and on land with two humans. However, the other narrators influence her story through the inclusion of translator's notes and footnotes, which indicate their divergent goals. While the "translator" exoticizes and personalizes the protagonist's narrative as he pursues a romantic relationship, the editor in the footnotes seeks to contextualize the protagonist's experiences to promote a more nuanced picture of her friend. In *Upwelling*, control over one's own story is connected to personal agency and empowerment, which manifests not only in the narrators' contestations and collaborations, but also in the world surrounding these characters: which family histories are retold and which ones disappear, which romances are valorized and which ones are ignored, which marginalized groups give testimony and which ones are condemned to archival silence.

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We command the pain to remain in the words. not in us.

—Alice Notley, *Iphigenia*

Translator's Preface

I¹ was fortunate enough to meet Fshwiw² shortly after her arrival on land—to be more specific, I confronted her after she broke into the attached studio of the Artist's House in search of fresh water and sturdy shelter. At the time, I never dreamed that our initial encounter would lead to a fulfilling, even symbiotic, artistic collaboration. In fact, when I first met her, I brandished a fishing pole over my head like a madman. In the days that followed, I worried that this particular object had deeply offended her, but soon I learned not to take her frowning silence too personally. Her quietness was merely a sign that her curious, creative mind was hard at work, spinning memories into songs and stories..

I am only grateful that she chose to share those memories with me. The Waldron Artist's Residency asks that its artists create works informed by the physical, historical, and cultural geography of the San Juan Islands, and as a newcomer, I often felt myself to be a stranger in a strange land. Fshwiw's songstories are my best, strongest connection to these islands and all the history they hold, and my hope is that Fshwiw speaks both through our collaborative translations and the sculptures that they inspired. Since I am, as far as I know, the first lubber—i.e., landperson, human—to work with a member of the reclusive Puget Sound Mer Village, my goal has always been for her voice, her melody, to sing out first and clearest. I compiled the following

¹ Jon Kristensen, b. 1989, graduated from UCLA's MFA Sculpture program in 2016, received the 2017-2018 Waldron Artist's Residency, bad at swimming and relationships.

² Fshwiw Angelicshw, b. 1998-ish, Salishan Sea mer with siren heritage, storyteller, my friend.

chapters, each corresponding to one of my own pieces, from April of 2017 to April of 2018, almost to the day. They recount both her life on land and in the sea, and reflect a mature understanding that belie Fshwiw’s years. Her stories are ongoing. They live, and change, and even as I wrote and edited these chapters, I would find that sometimes my faith in her honesty was devastatingly misplaced. Yet in the end, she found that she could trust me with the entire truth.

Fshwiw’s songs, transcribed in her chapters, are all her own, with the exception of a few phrases where lack of practice diminished her English. I have left “translator’s notes” throughout Fshwiw’s stories, sometimes to add my own story, sometimes to explain hers further. The “interludes” are also written in my own voice to tell the unsung stories in our lives—for as insular as we were in the beginning, the world outside the island soon intruded. I beg that you do not think of me as a translator in the traditional sense—the kind where meaning always falls short, and some things are lost entirely.³ Instead, I am a translator of song to sculpture, a translator of strangers to friends, a translator of ephemeral time spent over canned beer and fresh-caught fish to a gallery of enduring art. May this book serve as your comprehensive guide.

I can’t presume to translate what Fshwiw was thinking, and I won’t presume to tell you that I always knew what she meant. I can only say with any certainty that I’ve loved the work, and I’ve loved Fshwiw, and I hope that it’s enough.

— Jon Kristensen, 2018

³ If Jon is a benevolent “translator” of Fshwiw’s songs, then call me the curator of Jon’s sculptures. As in: it’s not a truthful picture of what I’m doing, and it makes me sound cooler than I am. The only thing that I’ve done that is even a *little* bit like curating is helping to put Jon’s sculptures at the bottom of Puget Sound.

Let’s be honest here. Both of us are editors. The difference is that I’m owning up to it, and I’m trying to interrupt as little as possible while still restoring and contextualizing Fshwiw’s songs. You won’t find a mushy, self-congratulatory preface from me in all of this.

Also, Jon didn’t choose the quote at the beginning. I did. It’s from one of Fshwiw’s favorites, and God knows she deserved more.

Chapter 1

The Wave and the Breath

(2017; shaped driftwood and iron fittings)

Crescents of pale driftwood swoop around a central column, three on each side. Stand within and feel how the wind passes over you, how it changes because of that passage, how it changes you.

I grew in the blue-green dark with my mother's hands combing through my hair, a sensation as natural as the waves that rushed through our home. When I drifted through the dim passages as a small child, searching for my mother after nightmares, I found my way by touch. My fingers skated across the fading carvings in the walls, fish and octopuses and orcas. A grandfather I'd never known had carved them into the walls, and though my father was meant to have deepened them, he never had. My grandfather had pried each room from the seafloor's stone, and now the ocean swept traces of him into oblivion. The waves sighed and shifted like the breath of an unknown giant—in and out, push and pull—sweeping my hair along like seaweed. Even now, when the wind is right and I hear the tides against the rocks, my own breathing settles into that rhythm. And when I think of my mother's long, patient fingers untangling my curls, dividing them, braiding them again, my self settles into stillness.

I learned such stillness early, curled in the gloom with her translucent fins at my back. *I'll go blind in this dark*, she swore, many times. I sat up straighter and scarcely opened my gills. Going loose-haired was not an option—*you'll be more knots than not*. Yet even as a child, I knew it was more than that. I noticed how the other village women looked at us from between

the long veils of their own hair, though I never dared to stare back. My mother's fingers tightened around my small wrist when their stony gazes turned to us, and her braided finery clinked when she raised her chin. Her pale eyes were never the first to turn away. *We are strangers here, and strange we should remain.*

So each morning began with hands weaving hair and ended with my eyes and skull stinging. While she pulled each curl tight into place, my mother entrusted me with her treasures—the wide-toothed tortoiseshell comb, the colorful ribbons not yet eaten by the sea, the waterlogged wooden box that held looping pearl strands and scarlet coral pendants and trinkets from the lubber world. Treasures, my mother called them, but they were dull against my lap's glimmering pink scales. She meant to tell me something with them, but for years, I didn't understand what.

On the day my mother cursed me,⁴ I turned a tiny dolphin made of transparent purple plastic over and over to watch it gleam, and my mother braided my hair into a crown studded with coins and shells. The deep tides of early spring rolled through the home, and our numb fingers were clumsy with cold. When she'd dressed her curls as well, she unpacked her polished hand mirror and held it out for us as gently as she'd once held me (for wasn't I also a way for her to glimpse her reflection?). She'd carried it with her all the way from the southern seas⁵ when she'd taken my father as her husband, but no matter how much she cleaned it, green scum still

⁴ I'm still not great at *hsifsh* (the Salish mer language, literally, "the breath-being of the wave"), but in the original recordings it sounds like Fshwiw says *ullarr* here. That's more complicated than just "she cursed me." It's more like, "she revealed a mystery to me." Maybe Fshwiw chose *cursed*, or maybe Jon changed it. It's not like I can ask Fshwiw about it. And I don't know if the recordings of the English translations, when Fshwiw and Jon would go through the *hsifsh* versions and translate them together, exist anymore (besides a few fragments).

⁵ The southern seas being the Caribbean, meaning Fshwiw's mother is from the Aycayia Collective, meaning that she is a siren, not a Salish Sea Mer. Meaning that Angelic swam a really long way to end up somewhere that she didn't want to be, and that didn't want her around either.

huddled in the curls and crevices of its golden border. Though sand had marred its silver center, we saw that we were alike as two scallop shells, brown skin and rosy hair. In our home's perpetual dusk, our reflections were abyssal ghosts, sister spirits floating cheek to cool cheek. So unlike the freckled, pale-skinned merfolk native to Papa's village. So unlike Papa. His seal-black eyes were the only inheritance I had from him.

When I remember this now, I know that Mama's yellow gaze bordered on hungry, but my own face in the mirror is an indistinct mist, or my appearance as I know it now replaces my child's mask. Yet I still recall the cold lines of coins and prickling shells against my scalp, the sulfur scent of the deep sea rushing up to meet us. I still remember my father's soft voice at the door: "Angelic?"

My mother's hand brushed the nape of my neck, the short hairs that grew there, so I didn't swim to my father. The spring tides surged around me, but I was stone-still, watching my father's scarred hand on the doorway, his dark eyes flicking to the floor. His hair, the same deep blue sheen of the fragile skin by a whale's eye, drifted in the currents as though alive but ailing. In my earliest memories, my father had strong arms to catch me and white teeth that flashed when he laughed, but even at this point, those memories were starting to fade. Now, he hesitated on the threshold of our home and spoke again: "It's beginning."

He disappeared from sight as my mother shifted between us. "And soon it will end. She won't know the difference." She did not choose my father's tongue, the wave-breaths that swam through the sea to a listener's ear. Lubber language floated from her lips, bubbles, seafoam.

"She should know," another voice said, rippling through our home with new volume. I peeked over my mother's shoulder. Uurwa, my father's friend, had appeared behind Papa like a

strong wave gathering after a lull in the surf. A long, knotted scar twisted his deep frown into a grimacing half-smile under his beard, but his black gaze was steady and serious.

My mother laughed a lubber's laugh, a sound I'd later know as drowning. Now she spoke with my father's tongue, the hissed words interspersed with snapping lubber phrases. "So you've taught him to understand my language now? What a prize." She gripped my hand and pulled me forward between the two men. "Fine. We will go. We will listen."

I did not look at my father or Uurwa, and after a glance at my mother's knifelike face, I did not look at her again either. I held the purple dolphin in one hand and made it dive through the morning light. But in an unexplored part of me, worry itched like a grain of sand. It would grow, a pearl, until it blocked my throat.

You must know *[t/n: during her telling, she took my hand and stared into me as though desperate that I understand. It was the first deliberate touch between us.]*, I was a child. I only reached for the beauty in my world. This is what I knew—sunlight slanting calm green through the kelps' ribbon-leaves, dappling the seabed, and blood stars and purple urchins hiding among the weedy stones. Villagers turned through the tall stalks, everpresent shimmer of scales, endless reassurance of voice. Even when out of sight, we were not alone. Schools of silver fish wove among us, more real than stars. The canopy overhead breathed with the tides.

At sunset, anemones and slugs bloomed with color, deep violets and oranges and reds, and on summer nights, whale songs washed into the grotto of my bed. I thought of my father and Uurwa and all the other hunters returning with full nets to provide for my mother and me, for the whole village, and I slept better. When I woke, it was to waves that glowed gold at their crests. Even in the dead spaces where nothing grew, where we were not allowed to go for fear that we

would suffocate in the empty water, silvery medusae drifted like serene moon spirits. I was a child, and badness existed only at the edges of my vision, lurking like orcas at the village outskirts.

Perhaps this was why my gaze glanced from my mother's face that morning, from her shoulders as she pulled me in her wake out from our home, out through the kelp groves newly unfurling with spring. In winter, the rocks lay cold and wave-scoured beneath a scum of gray-green weeds, but now long fronds swam with the tides, and their gold-green floats drifted below us like upturned faces. We passed through the village center, where the oldest homes rested among deep, curling weeds. Their rounded roofs were nearly invisible among the foliage, but the taste of well-worn sealskin vests and fishflesh wrapped in spiced leaves lingered in the waves and told us that this was yet a living village. From there, my mother swam with me into a silence broken by the rise and crash and return of the sea.

Broken *only* by the sea's voice, I thought at first. But though the sea's language was our own, and we called it in tones that echoed its currents and waves, the sea did not speak as we spoke. It did not story—it merely named itself in all its forms.⁶ So it was that I first recognized the voices of unknown others shifting through the tides. They called in my father's language—yet I saw no one. No shadows shifted in the stirred-up water. Starfish skin prickled across my arms. I shivered in the chill water, and my mother pulled me into her arms and hummed her lullaby, her oldest and strongest song. Still, I heard them. A disembodied whisper below my

⁶ While many mer populations today speak the languages of their nearest landfolk neighbors (different siren populations, for example, speak English, Spanish, French, and a variety of Caribbean Creoles, and the last known colony of Mediterranean Mer spoke "Sea Latin"), a few groups still use their own aquatic tongues, including the Micronesian diaspora and the Salish Sea Mer. I did my best to understand some linguistics studies about it, and it seems like they're echoing what Fshwiw says here: the way they speak moves through the water. *Hsifsh*'s entire vocabulary mimics different ocean sounds, and through recreating these sounds, Salish Sea Mer *somehow* "call" the ocean into its many shapes. Fshwiw described this to me as "the sea recognizing itself." I've practiced it, a lot, but all I've managed to do is get some seawater to splash out of a glass.

ear—*found her among moonlight*—a murmur behind my neck—*listen, as it never was*—an invisible chorus, turning and twining alongside us.

The dwellings below were empty. I saw through the portals in their roofs. Empty baskets, empty nets, empty homes. The sea breathed through as though among the picked-clean skeleton of a fallen whale. My mother and I, and my father and Uurwa behind us, could have been the only mer in the entire ocean. Yet voices chimed through the sea, and finally I closed my ears and eyes to them.

When I opened them again, it was because my father pried one hand away from my ear. “Fshwiw, look,” he said.

My mother’s arms locked around me, but I obeyed. I looked. Below us, the rift opened, an impossible mouth splitting the seafloor from one side of my vision to the other. Past the shadowed sand and stones at its borders, its depths swallowed everything into darkness. Jagged, lightless, and uncaring. *[t/n: When I asked Fshwiw its size, she demonstrated by sending me down the road away from her, pretending that she was standing on its edge. “No, farther.” “You’re standing over the deepest part now.” “You’re about halfway there.” I looked down at my feet on the gravel but saw the cold oblivion of an ocean trench. A small one, admittedly, only a couple hundred yards wide, but I still never understood how they could just dive into it—I couldn’t help picturing huge toothy creatures looming behind them, eager to strike. I suppose merfolk have more of a tolerance for potential horror.]* The smell of sulfur, the taste of it, washed over my gills—so much stronger now—and curdled within my throat. Though we were far above it and though I would not sink, I clung more tightly to my mother. “She’s afraid,” Mama scolded.

The rift wanted my gaze, but I did not want the rift. I glanced away and found a pair of dark eyes. Uurwa's daughter Hsssh, my age, wrapped her green-freckled arms around her father's shoulders, but she stared directly at me. Her deep green hair curled and waved around her face. She did not blink. Uurwa's eyes flicked towards me. His wife, too, spared me a look as her hands tightened over her pregnant stomach, and his ancient father frowned through his paling beard, his eyes like two black stones. And the other families, the other hunters, the mothers, the children. All of them, floating still and silent above the rift, the silver sunrays of early spring dancing across their bodies and flashing over their scarcely-moving tails. Their sights turning to us and turning away, so many small abysses. My gills fluttered.

My father cupped my hand in both of his. His skin was like an oyster shell closing around me. "There's nothing to fear from the dark."

In the years after this, I learned how my parents lied. Downshone eyes and hesitation, hardbitten voices and twitching gills. My father was not lying when he told me I had nothing to fear, and given what darkness has meant for him, I think I can understand why.

He was my father, and at the time, that was enough for me to believe him. Together, with my mother clutching me close, my father and I looked to where the light vanished. And something shimmered. Something stirred.

Nothing to fear, he had said, but that did not mean there was nothing at all. My father's people kept their songs safe down in the deepest dark, down in the cold where they would not spoil. Songs from the year before, songs from my grandfather's time, and songs from centuries ago, when tuna were uncountable and salmon were like stars. Songstories to remember, to mourn, to instruct.

Every late summer, when sunlit cradles of kelp fronds tempted us towards the surface, the village choir turned away from the sun and its warmth. They joined, hand to dappled hand, and descended into the rift, their tails glinting gold and green, blue and silver. Glinting until the light vanished, and the tides dissolved, and the abyss opened around them, black and total, like an empty throat. Until the depth squeezed their lungs, and their gills trembled, and the only life they knew were each other's heartbeats, cast through their fingers as wavelets. At the bottom of the rift, they settled among scattered shells and the songs of the village—the ghostly voices of the long-dead and the recently gone, those who were now the somehow-still-here—and cast a new current, the year's stories. Their chorus creaked beneath the weight of the waves, but they gripped each other's hands and raised their voices all the same, weaving the sounds of the sea into new stories, new magic. The miracle birth of healthy twins to the gentle hunter and his wife. The unfavorable marriage that ended in tragedy. The slick oil, spilled by the sinking lubber vessel, that pooled in the wintry sea and caught fire, an ill and venomous sun. Licking flames that cast flickering witchlight⁷ down onto our faces.

Every year, stories like these. I intend to tell a different story—though no one has ever asked me for my own song before. I wish you could hear the way it would move beneath the waves. Songs make their own currents, their own little tides. An ocean within an ocean. A world inside a world. Every summer, the village choir sang a record of the year into the pitch black for days on end, and every spring, the stories rose out of the darkness to sing again. A cycle as endless as tides, as breath.

⁷ Jon used witch here, but the original word is *kuelksh*, which literally means “birdwife” or, if you want to be a dick about it: “gullslut.” As in, “the gullslut’s bird-grimy claws shot out for the child, and her open mouth bubbled with rot stench.” That’s from a “moon story” (basically, a folktale, something that’s still true but doesn’t happen anymore) that Fshwiw told me in late fall—the perfect time to be scared of stories, especially since we’d finally stopped being scared of each other.

[t/n: I asked Fshwiw, “A record of the year? But how did you keep them in order?” She opened her mouth. Closed it. The last notes of her verse hovered around us, persisting longer than they should have. Siren magic, her mother’s magic, coming from such a trusting girl. “They don’t need to be in order,” she said at last. “What happens once never stops afterwards.”]

You wouldn’t know what our Upwelling sounds like. I don’t think any lubber knows—besides Sylvia,⁸ and she isn’t really all lubber, is she, just as I’m not all mer—the currents we’ve set for lubbers like you would drag you away, toss you up on the rocks, before you ever got close enough to hear. So, this is the Upwelling, as I heard it when I was still a small child.

It begins with whispers in the water, the oldest scraps of story, centuries older than centuries, starting to separate and drift like scattered scales. Glimmers of song, a few notes climbing, sparkling, and vanishing. Phantoms, washing out with the tides into the open ocean and away from the village forever. And the tides are strong—brutal. Dredging the seafloor, dragging sand and shell and bone, gathering themselves until they lunge, surge, up across the rift—

They spill forth, endless octopus, intelligent anemone, their currents shifting and swirling—visible, yes, visible as the wake of a once-dear friend, light and movement and silvered iridescence uncoiling, spiraling to the waiting descendants. Thin as a finger, thin as a wrist, thick as a tail or two bodies intertwined. Fearsome, rising cacophony, a cresting storm wave over the night-dark sea. Brace, breathe. It is upon you.

⁸ Sylvia Peregrine, probably not her real last name, b. 1992, formerly employed at Edwards & Sons (& Daughter) Fisheries, now in possession of a bartered tail. Once fed a book of poetry by Yosano Akiko to Puget Sound a page at a time. She’s also my ex-girlfriend.

I buried my face into my mother's neck, felt her pulse thrum against my eyelid until it seemed our warm skin would burst. The songs savaged between us, throwing me to her fingertips. My scream lost in the song enveloping me, her call caught among the harmonies.

Sweet chillwater hunt, under landmen's shadows. Voices casting out, low and wailing. Rush and bubble through the cove, thrash of salmon tails towards the river mouth, torn seaweed sour on the tongue. Lubber boats, pillars of shadow. *Listen, child, the hunted can never be wary enough. Our fathers died in their own nets, dragged—*

I fell from the song, and the little purple dolphin slipped from between my fingers, vanished in a swirl of sound. But my father still had my other hand. A hunter would not lose his grip.

Another current coiled over me, and another chorus. The words tore past me, their urgency passing over my eyes like a shadow—*deep water, black night, urchins beneath our searching hands, worthy scars to show we'd found her—*

My fingers prickled—I squeezed my eyes shut among the looping, lilting rounds, and a third song crashed into me, high and mournful wails—*and will the village dissolve, will it be the sand we shift—a gravel-throated trio, houses emptying, carvings subsiding to stone—my father had my arms now, held me before him—summer days, endless days, the clear light and the courting—sunshine moving through my gills, and I couldn't cover my ears, the songs were in my bones, I was the home the ocean moved through—the foolish went to look above—*⁹

⁹ Since we don't have the whole story, it's hard to tell, but that song that starts with "sweet chillwater hunt" sounds really similar to the Elliott's Bay Culling (not massacre, you won't find it called that in the records) in 1853, when settlers murdered several dozen mer hunters during a chinook salmon run. Or it's from another, smaller spree killing, one of the ones that barely gets mentioned. And as for the village dissolving, I mean, there are abandoned mer villages scattered all over the Salish Sea. You can dive to them. You can buy tasteful coffee table books about them. And the oil spill and the fire? My dad *still* talks about that.

My point is that for someone who claims to be about the "physical, historical, and cultural geography," it sure seems like Jon didn't spend much time among the microfiche.

“Fshwiw.” My father’s voice, urgent and unsinging. “Find a single song. Find a single song and swim with it. Here—”

Lovely in the dark places and lovely in the light. A duet, two female singers, their voices twining. My father’s grip loosened, and I floated free, the song buoying beneath me. Different now—gentle, uncrashing, unbubbling. I flicked my fins and spun up with it, flowing with the twisting column of sound. It lifted me easy as hands. *I have held such pearls in my throat when I speak to you.* When I opened my eyes, I found the village moving with the stories, tails turning, chins lifting. They swirled in the open water, carried along by the shimmering currents. A young couple joined hands as the water carried them overhead. A chain of older children mixed laughter with their melody. A woman with gray hair sweeping out into the song drifted beneath me, her eyes closed. *But it’s beautiful, to build a home beside one so like a sister.* And Hsssh, her moon face smiling, reached out—to me. *Beautiful, to string a necklace of things unsaid.* My soft curls, undone by the tides, tangled with Hsssh’s. The coins and shells that had adorned me were tumbling somewhere, unseen and unknown, into the darkness below. *If I give it as a gift, will I see you wear it?*

I smiled. Hsssh took my hands, and we spun through the song, laughing.

I have to confess—I do not remember all of the songs. I have done my best, but some of what I’ve told you is just fragile reconstructions. Yet I remember the song with Hsssh. I remembered, and so did she. Years later, in our grotto beneath the summer kelp, she held out her hands and sang it again, and I understood the meaning that I hadn’t before. *[t/n: Though Fshwiw didn’t hesitate when she sang this verse in Salishan mermian, she stumbled—more than she usually stumbled, in those early days when English still didn’t quite belong to her—when she sang it once more in a language that I could understand. Her gaze darted away from mine. I*

remember feeling amused and a little proud—the lightness in one’s chest that comes with knowing that someone cares what you think of them.] I had asked Hsssh to sing this story for me because I wanted to feel the words pass between her lips, and also because I never heard its ending.

Never, because my mother seized my wrist, her lubber speech dying in the space between us, her gold eyes fierce in her hard face, and she yanked me out of the song, back into the tumbling throng of a thousand burbling stories, back into nonsense and near nonbeing. She carried me with her wake and one hand, away from Hsssh and her wide eyes, away from Uurwa and the hard line of his scarred mouth, away from my father turning at his side with a questioning look. Away from the songs, though they had spilled into the groves and the village, so scattered lyrics fell on us like wind-driven waves. And I pulled at my mother’s fingers, staring at where we had been, but my mother tightened her grip and only looked ahead.

What is breath beneath the waves? Cold salt on your tongue. Feathering gills, a parting, a relief. Open lips, open throat. Breath for my father’s people is a constant stream within cycles—the wave crashing down and withdrawing, the tide rolling in and returning, the year spinning in its gyre. The breath dives *through* it. [*t/n: Her slender brown arm cut the air between us like an arrow.*] A straightness, a certain passage. The breath moves as we move, as we grow, and the ocean moves around and within us. Our lungs are little seas, flooded from birth. The word for inhale, *hsi*, to be alive. *Hsi*, is. *Hsi*, the hiss of water over gills. The word for exhale, *sshu*, to sing. *Sshu*, an upwelling of one’s own. The dark oceans in our lungs spilling out from our throats, shivering with song, with speech, warming the water. Together: *hsi-sshu*, to live well in your little way.

As for death...there is a moon story of a woman who lost her children to the surface world, and she sang their names so she would not forget. Sang their names until they melted together, sang their names until they were only a sea-voice, sang their names until an eddy, a whirlpool, a maelstrom spread like a wailing, grieving mouth over her home, with her bereft at its center. Her children, paddling out to visit her, capsized and sank beneath the waves. Legs kicking. Lungs burning. Invisible in the whirling ruin of their own names. And when the water cleared, all that remained was a whisper, *hsi, hsi*, and then even that dissolved into stillness: the woman, alone. The oldest word for death is silence, and the oldest word for life is the sound of a breath.¹⁰

There is another kind of being, though. You hear it sometimes in the oldest songs: *Ulla*. To gulp air, to understand what was missing. It has a different meaning now. To be cursed, to be fisheyed-dead, to have inside you that which no one can understand.

My mother grew in southern sunlight. She grew speaking lubber language and casting her siren songs like nets. She grew breathing air. Yet she never felt cursed until she came to my father's village. Cold, deep waters. Rough waves. The noise of lubber boats, hulls halfway to sea-rot, grinding their way across the skin of the Sound each day, yet the lubbers themselves as

¹⁰ I think it might be easy for some people to dismiss the moon stories that Fshwiw includes in her songs, since some of what they say appears impossible; for example, Salishan mer, according to all known historical sources, have never had a form of magic that allowed them to go ashore (Fshwiw's experience with siren songs being the exception). However, overlooking the moon stories would be a mistake. We might dig up evidence that shows Salishan mer *did* use siren-type magic in the past, and even if we don't, these stories still matter.

Look: there's a Samish story about Ko-Kwal-Alwoot, a young woman who met a man from under the sea (as far as I can tell, not a merperson. A spirit, or, sometimes, the king of the sea creatures). When her parents refused to let her marry him, the fish disappeared from the waves, the shellfish dug themselves deep down out of reach, and even the clear streams dried up. Ko-Kwal-Alwoot begged her parents, and eventually, they relented. She could marry the man from under the sea, so long as she returned yearly to visit them. She did, but as the years passed, she became more and more like her spirit husband, with scales spreading over her skin and seaweed waving down her back instead of hair. Her family, seeing her discomfort at being ashore, released her from her promise. Ko-Kwal-Alwoot returned to the sea. Her hair flowed over the tops of the waves as kelp, and the waters were thick with fish and other seafood. She still looked out for her people.

I grew up with this story. I walked with my aunts and my cousins to leave food floating on the water for her. And I don't really believe the story the same way I did when I was younger (although, like my dad says, it can't hurt to greet her), but being out on the Sound means something different to me because of it. I'm with family. Fshwiw's moon stories do the same thing for her, and that's why they're important. I hope I explained this right.

untouchable as the memories of a dream—as untouchable as her bright-haired cousins, who faded and softened like her trinkets as the years passed.

Why did my mother pull me from the Upwelling, gripping me with enough strength to leave a bruise like a painful ornament? For years, I thought that if I could understand this, then I could find a way back. Was it that I let someone else’s voice carry me? Was it that I took Hsssh’s hands in mine? Was it that I smiled? Or was it something that I couldn’t see? *[t/n: I spent much of my childhood asking myself similar questions. Hearing them again from Fshwiw—who didn’t deserve it, no more than I had—left a sour taste in my mouth. I reached reflexively for her hand, then stopped myself, gripped my knee. I don’t think she noticed. It was dark, and she was in the story.]* Perhaps the songs had battered against her until she nearly lost herself, or perhaps she had called and called my name into the writhing water, and I hadn’t heard her. There is the silence of not speaking, and there is the silence of no one hearing you, and both are a kind of temporary death. Or perhaps she did carry a curse, and she made it my inheritance.

I don’t know why, because in the end, my mother left me there alone.

But not yet. Years away, and not foretold, not foreseen. Now, my mother’s hand dug into my wrist, and I regretted dropping the little dolphin. I apologized for losing her treasure.

“You shouldn’t have heard that,” she said. Lubber words again, tumbling end over end. “Forcing you to listen—flooding children with so much superstition—”

I opened my mouth—I had enjoyed the last song, I hadn’t been forced—but Mama continued speaking. “Expecting you to soak up whatever some fool said years ago.”

Listen, child, a passing song breathed. Take not the smoke-filled air above.

My mother slashed her arm through the water as though shoving the singer away. The songs continued, but I was silent until I felt the land curving up beneath us, the water growing shallow.

“Mama—” Salt spray crashed down above me, the force a hand on the back of my head, the pressure so unlike the rollers of the village. I cringed, dragged myself back. “Mama!”

At last, she turned to me, her yellow eyes darting between mine, reddening at their edges. Her mouth twitching. A few pink curls floating, undone. My beautiful mother—someday, I would think of her, the daughter of faraway sirens, the child of seaspray and sunlight, wandering our blue twilit home as I had wandered it. But where I had understood my grandfather’s carvings as shadows of his hands and his love, to my mother they were indistinct and meaningless beneath her fingers. I had turned her lubber treasures—the comb, the mirror, the countless baubles—over and over in my hands with distant wonder, but for my mother, they were a memorial of her former life. And now, she pulled me close as though I were her last breath above the waves.

This is what it means, as a child, to reach for comfort and see someone else reaching for comfort from you. I have seen my face emerge from greenish gloom into my mother’s hand mirror. I have seen myself ripple and distort above shimmering waves. Once, I saw myself in the eye of an orca, a fearful gleam of a girl within a black ring. But to see the need on my mother’s face, the anguished slash of her open mouth—that was the strangest, darkest reflection.

“Do you believe them now?” My mother cried. She held me in place even as the churning waves—their crashing making her voice small—threatened to drag me away and hurl me against the black rocks all around us. Pulled forward and back in the sea’s panicked breaths, in my panicked breaths. Mama shook my shoulders. “Do you believe these people? Are you their daughter now?”

Sobs rattled through me. I was full of dead things tossed up from within, seaweed scraps and fish flesh and empty shells. So I could not answer her, and so my mother asked again—and so when I still could not answer, she embraced me.

“You are my daughter,” she said, speaking each word as though it contained an entire day and night. The seawater around the soft skin of her neck was too close, smelled musk-like and wounded. “I will not lose you to them. You are *mine*.”

Her arms, hot in the cold water, tightened still further around me. I think I made a noise, but I couldn’t hear myself as the sea rushed past my ears. My mother’s hair tangled over me. Her dark chin triangled upwards. She strove to the surface. Towards the brightest waters, the bursting sunlight. I closed my eyes.

The waves roared. Then, silence.

Not a silence of the ear, but a silence of sensation. The wave that moved me as I moved through it, the breath that swam through me as I swam through it—gone. The space—the air—around me stung open and empty, and I was vessel—seashell—raindrop. Alone, my skin tuned to the harshing wind as though to a hiss of contempt. My gills flapped, useless and salt-stinging in the dry air. For the first time, I knew the heaviness in my lungs as a danger. I beat my hands against my mother’s collarbone, gargling, gasping.

She held me closer. “Cough and come forward. Spit what remains.”

A demand, a siren song. My body convulsed, and warm seawater spilled from my mouth in a stream. Little oceans, vanishing back to where they had originated, disappearing among the tooth-colored foam and the rolling dark waves. I emptied. I breathed.

Ulla.

“I want to be home,” I said, but the words of my father’s tongue sizzled and died in the air. The tears on my face—tears, unknown before and unwashed now—ran blood-hot on my cheeks.

“Your home is larger than that hole your grandfather dug.” Her language rang through the air, vanishing as quickly as it had originated, like a slap that leaves a sting. “Your home is larger than that village.”

The water lifted us. Its surface blazed with reflected sunlight, suddenly impenetrable. As though I were cut off at the waist. As though I couldn’t return. The breakers crashed against the high black rocks, a distant, wordless rage. I whimpered.

“Look around you,” my mother whispered. This time, she did not compel me with her voice. She pleaded. “You looked for your father, won’t you look for me?”

I pulled my gaze from the water.

Until that day, my world had been dark, soft. Uncertain until I approached closely, indistinct until I held a face between my hands. *I saw you*, my mother would accuse Papa, *I saw you last night in the groves*. And my father would say, *impossible, impossible*, until even I doubted the figures that I had seen wreathed in summer luminescence, the tiny glowing creatures in the disturbed water betraying an embrace.

But the world of the air is not translucent. The world of the air is clarity, so precise and so intense in its delineations that it seemed impossible to tell a lie. Gleaming black rocks soared overhead, every fissure and barnacle as apparent as the hand at the end of an arm. Against them, seaweed hung slack and half-glittering, lifting only a few limp tendrils with the waves. What bloomed beneath the water—amber and soft-bristled, green and smoothly translucent—dragged in the air. Picked over by crabs with shining carapaces. *[t/n: Based on her descriptions and*

*several Google searches, I think the vegetation that she mentions here are sea lettuce, witch's hair, and Turkish washcloth. I found that I was much better equipped to imagine what Fshwiw was discussing when I had the right noun. Throughout her songs, she taught me that names are incredibly important.]*¹¹ And the waves, the spray—"They cannot hurt you," my mother whispered, and I did not believe her as I had believed my father, but I stared at what the sea became when it met violence. Sun-white whales of only a moment, towering and breaching and tumbling, every water drop outlined and shimmering silver. The sky, still pale gold with early morning, was its own light-filled endlessness extending forever to the west. I thought I might fall up into it like creatures fell into the rift. I thought something must live in its pale light, I thought songs of the air would deliver themselves to me. Only the dark line of the land to the east broke the perfect bowl of the sky.

The land. Jagged pines and their dark shadows between. For the first time, I separated the scent of earth from the scent of salt. I gulped it down, *ulla*. Tree sap and damp soil, things decaying and things still green and growing. The smell lived in the space just above my throat.

"You see? There is a whole world to call home," Mama said. In the air, her language floated, little boats on the waves. I repeated her words to hear my own voice join hers. She cradled me, and the cove—rocks, waves, trees—rose around us in an embrace.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. Now, watch."

¹¹ What a weird way to prioritize Fshwiw's voice, by interrupting this moment to let us know about "Turkish washcloth." If names are so important, then why didn't Jon just ask what Fshwiw called them? Because I know for a fact that Fshwiw never called sea lettuce "sea lettuce" even in conversation with lubbers. I know this because once, she wanted to take the boat over to one of her favorite harvesting spots to get some for a salad, and this is what she said when I asked her what she was going to grab:

"It's the—the—" Then she squished her hands like she was balling up a piece of paper, and then she made a noise that sounded like a shrimp talking to a bird, which I think was the actual name of the thing, and then she said, "Do you know?" And I said, "No, sorry," and then she said, "It's like Swiss cheese, but green? And leafy?"

Jon could have asked for literal translations or gone for the spirit of the meaning, but no. Sea lettuce. I can't tell what Fshwiw says in the recordings either. Smooth-snap-plant? Wave-bite-weed? Sea lettuce has a bit of zest to it, so that could make sense. Anyway, I've done my best to take out later interruptions from Jon re: species names, because they rarely have anything interesting to say, but I left this first one in to give you an idea of what this "translation" looked like when I got it.

And I wanted to tell you that story about Fshwiw. I love that story.

The first notes of her song lifted the hairs along my arms. Her melody belonged here—high, clear notes that shook the air and made it sweet, that settled soft as seafoam or glided up and out of hearing. Flew among the ferns and mossy stones in the forest, traced the invisible daylight constellations in the sky above. Mama called, and the animals of the air answered.

Shorebirds first, turning through the wind, catching it in their slender wings, whirling in a ring over our heads. Scraps of rainclouds, seafoam made solid, their calls high and swift. Jays and crows swooped into the circle, deep shadow spots, joined by dust-colored sparrows and bright songbirds that dipped and plunged. Melodies rising and falling as quickly as they did. Hawks and owls, gliding, the sun shining through their silent feathers in amber and ivory stripes. A massive white egret beat its wings, and I felt their breeze against my face.

At the time, I did not know their names.¹² I only knew the glossy black of the crow's feathers, the flashing eyes of the jays and the songbirds, the delicate freckling on the shorebirds' bellies. I only saw them in their hundreds swirling above us, a column of life that I had not known lived. Their wingbeats were the percussion of my mother's song, and something lifted in my chest. Something, a desire, reached up from my throat, but, like the birds, I could not yet name it.

I could not call any of these things by their correct names because I was not meant to know such things—my mother was right, at least, about that part of my father's world. There are some songs that the choir does not sing.

When my mother's last note quivered and faded, the birds broke away, scattering into the forest and down the coast. We were alone with the sound of the ocean once more. Mama brushed

¹² For example, I took out a note from Jon here that started with him and Fshwiw trying to figure out exactly what species of warbler Fshwiw had seen, concluding that it wasn't a warbler and just a jay, and then devolving into a long discussion about how his dad had taken him and his sisters birdwatching but hadn't known any of the birds, just said, "Your mom would know." Why is that important for Fshwiw's story?

my curls back from my forehead, her brown hand warm against my chilled skin. I settled into her arms, lulled into the kind of peace brought on by exhaustion. My mother's pink braids, gleaming with her lubber riches, clinked gently. Her gold eyes were soft. She said she loved me. She said I'd been brave. She said: "Your father's people are barbarians."

My mother came to my father's village for peace, and she left—without me—for the same reason. And maybe that is why I returned to that cove all those years later. I had watched my mother vanish into the empty blue of open water, following the wake of those she loved more than me, and so I returned to the place where she had held me closest, where she had forced a new kind of breath, where she had kissed a curse into my forehead and thought it was a blessing.

Yes, maybe that is why I left my father's village, why I came to the cove on that last day, when the only bird was a far off seagull smudging the sky. When the lubber girl, Sylvia, reached for my hands but kept her eyes on my glittering tail. She wove her fingers with mine. I sang her legs from her body. They turned in a tidepool's low surf, driftwood not yet soaked with salt. She clutched me still tighter as I lifted my voice again—my mother's voice, a siren's voice, capable even of commanding flesh to unknit from flesh, the only painless way to tear yourself apart. I parted my scales from my skin. As my voice roughened, Sylvia crooked her forehead against my shoulder. We had agreed. We had agreed on this, that we wanted the trade.

I would have given her more than this, more than my mother's half. I would have reshaped myself entirely, had I not feared making myself a new stranger to the only one who still mattered to me. *[t/n: I couldn't resist asking her: Who? Did she, like me, have little siblings that she still cared for? Or was there a lover, empty arms spread wide in the kelp forests? When I asked, though, Fshwiw shook her head, covered her mouth with her fingers as though holding*

back a smile. “That story isn’t ready yet,” she told me, and I told myself that this was an opportunity to practice patience.]

In the end, I restitched my tail to Sylvia’s hips first, sang the slits and feathers of gills into her neck. A complex melody that left my throat sore, and a poor choice (I am not sure if I have made any good choices). This one was simply a mistake because Sylvia, having gulped water and tasted a new being—*hsi, hsi*—dove beneath the waves. No glances thrown, even carelessly, over her shoulder. I watched half of myself, shining and pink and tail-flicking, vanish among the greening kelp.¹³ My mother’s voice curled in my throat. My breathing fell alone, outside the rhythm of the sighing waves. No council to be found among them. The ocean spoke endlessly and without sense.

I will spare you the details of my fear—no one wishes to know the unpleasantness of these states, the unfortunate weeping flesh, the worms in the gills. Just know that my fingers where she had held them were still warm. When I finally seized her legs from the water, I saw their black tattoos vivid against the fishbelly skin, seeming to writhe with life just below the rippling waves. A few thin strands of blood tentacled into the tides.

I came onto land crawling, my hair in untended knots, the designs beneath my fingertips unreadable, my breath ragged outside the ocean’s embrace. And my legs. Toe-twitching and sapling-boned, new and *mine*. My knees scraping pale to bloody on the rough rocks, my toes digging into the moss and the mud. Soles and heels against the cool earth as I gathered myself to

¹³ When Fshwiw first told me this story, she left out that Sylvia abandoned her at the tidepool. In every mer culture with the magic to practice these trades, or “ontological barter” per anthropologist Ramon Figueroa, leaving your partner early is the worst faux pas. Even among largely secular groups, it’s seen as a bad omen, a curse.

I think Fshwiw knew her audience (she was always good at that) and decided that I’d probably just start yelling if she told me all this. If I’d been thinking more clearly about it at the time, I would have believed her. I knew better than most, after all. Sylvia never unpacked the go-bag she stowed in the back of my closet. She took Dad’s little powerboat out alone on the weekends and only left scrawled notes behind for my family to decode. She was gone for days among the inlets, even before she vanished for good. I told my dad to be patient with her the way he was patient with my mother. I had plenty of experience weaving together excuses. I wore them like sweaters.

stand, shaking. To step, foot after unsteady foot, past the afternoon's blue-shadowed trees and into the field whose whispering grass spoke over the waves, whose white flowers lay docile in my hands. I knew sunlight on my skin, no longer salt-cool and distant, but bright and near as a kiss. That, *that* is why I traded my tail for lubber legs, why I came ashore. For peace. For the chance to have my voice be the only one I hear, for a chance to breathe in my own rhythm.

Interlude

April 2017

By the time Fshwiw uttered the last lines of her song,¹⁴ dusk had fallen on Waldron Island, and everything around the Artist's House was settling into drowsiness. Inside, however, the air hummed. Fshwiw looked at me from across the heavy coffee table and the half-dozen candles still glowing there. When I had lit them at the start of the evening, hoping to save generator fuel and to create a certain atmosphere, they'd been ivory pillars. Now, the tiny orange flames wavered in their wax ponds and gleamed in Fshwiw's dark eyes, gilded her high cheekbones. I met her gaze, leaning forward far enough that I could feel the heat of the candles on the underside of my neck. She mimicked me. We were alike.

"So your mother left you?" I asked.

"Yes." Her eyes flicked away—I thought nothing of it at the time, but of course she had told me how her parents lied—and her voice took on a bitter tone. "She had enough of my father's village. And enough of me too, I think."

"My mother left as well." I'd been eight, running after her car, slipping in the snow at the roadside, watching the red glow of her tail lights disappear over the hill like the worst sunset. My

¹⁴ The English translation, he means. Fshwiw composed her songs in *hsifsh*, sang them to Jon, and then translated them with his help. Like I said, I only have snippets of their recorded conversations about the translations, but here's how part of one conversation went. I think it's from a later story about Hsssh.

J: So you swam out to meet her. Were you casual about it, or—I mean, did you try to go slowly, or did you try to get there really fast?

F: (tongue-click [basically "um" in *hsifsh*]) I try to look like I'm going slowly. I said *sshstwrr*, which is like, "Oh, I'm graceful and sweet and I've got nowhere to be in particular," you know? Nonchalant. Casual, like you said.

J: Oh okay, so—I was thinking we might want to use "dart," but it sounds like that wouldn't work.

F: Oh no, no, that—(laughter)—that would be like *rrmwrr*, like I'm hunting her, which, no, no, not in this case.

J: That's not *quite* what dart means. It doesn't have to be aggressive.

F: No? Then you tell me what I should call it when you have that look in your eyes and you come to me across the kitchen. Aggressive? No. Hunting, desiring? Absolutely yes.

All this over one word. Hours and hours of conversation went into every one of these chapters. I guess if you work closely with someone for that long, you're going to either love them or hate them.

little sister kept chasing even after I'd fallen, the furry hood of her jacket flying off her head. Back in the house, the crib held another sister, and my father held a grudge.

But I didn't think of those moments now, of the sharp, clear pain of the icy air in my lungs, of the deeper, pit-like pain in my gut—a metaphysical kind of injury. I thought of Fshwiw, and of what Fshwiw would think of me in turn. I knew my words were the first of many voyages between us. "I just want you to know that I get it. I understand."

Fshwiw's small hand slipped into mine, disappearing completely beneath my palm. "Thank you for listening. People usually—" She clicked her tongue, sighed.

"Those people are idiots. You're a great singer. And beautiful. A beautiful singer, I mean."

Fshwiw laughed. I joined her, but I kept my hand very still, as though if I touched her too roughly, she'd dissipate, smoke or seafoam.

"I'd love to keep listening to you," I said, and she quieted, her eyes wide. Just barely in the gloom, I saw her gills quiver against her neck. "I mean, I have a lot more sculptures to make, and it sounds like you have more stories—more songs—to share? I mean—" I took a deep breath, gestured at nothing. "Sure, you're here to find peace, but why couldn't you find peace when your mother left? That definitely sounds like a story to me."

She smiled, a little shy. "It's a long story."

I was relieved and gratified to see that she didn't look as surprised as she had the first time I'd asked her for a story nearly a week before. That night, I'd watched her across the antique dining room table as she puzzled out the spaghetti, drawing long, sauce-dripping strands of it into the air and looking at me doubtfully. "You have to twirl the fork," I told her, demonstrating.

“Oh.” She let the pasta drop back onto her plate, and her shoulders curled forward, bringing a cloud of pink curls close around her. “Thank you.”

The sun was still hovering somewhere over the Pacific horizon when we’d finished eating—or, I should say, when Fshwiw had finished eating and when I realized that I’d spent most of dinner looking at her—and the light coming through the windows of the Artist’s House spread rosy twilight on every surface. Fshwiw’s long-fingered hands stacked our two plates, and she followed me into the kitchen. “Thank you again,” she said as she handed them to me, and I scrubbed at them with the limp kitchen sponge. I’d already lost track of how many times she’d thanked me for simple things—a shower, a glass of water, a pair of clean socks, a reasonable reaction to seeing her gills flared wide and red—and I responded the same way I had every time: “It’s no trouble.”

“I should—I should go. It’s late.” But she stood in the center of the kitchen, her bare feet pointed in at each other, the tattoos on her pale legs trembling shadows. “I should, shouldn’t I?”

For a moment, I couldn’t speak. She took her first step towards the door.

“Wait.” I reached past her to the old freezer door, and she flinched, sidestepped out of my way. Her soft hair brushed my arm. For an instant, I smelled my own shower soap, and beneath it, the faintest scent of salt and seaweed. I dug one hand into the half-eaten bags of frozen fruit and vegetables and the dubious Ziploc with ice-crystaled meat, all left over from previous residents. The cold did me good, and even better once my hand closed around a half-eaten carton of Häagen-Dazs. “Here—you’ve never had ice cream, right? It’s good to have something sweet after dinner.”

She smiled. “Okay.”

We ate leaning against the kitchen counters, and though Fshwiw had sipped the bitter, bottom-shelf red wine at dinner with hardly a blink, she winced at the vanilla ice cream.

“Too cold?” I asked.

She shook her head, still wrinkling her nose. “Is this what sweet is? It’s like a toothache.”

I laughed and reached for her bowl, but she held it closer to her chest. “No, I—I still want it. Sorry, I should have just said thank you.”

In the silence, I heard the *snk-snk* of her gills opening and closing, nervous. I clinked my spoon against my bowl. “I like you saying what you think.”

After the ice cream, the light was a deep blue-gray, and the spaces between the narrow pines were darker still. She asked to stay and help me clean up—she didn’t want to be an ungrateful guest. And after the dishes were meticulously washed, dried, and stacked, and all the herbs and spices were back in their little cupboard, the first stars shone. The generator’s hum was barely audible above the frogsong. I asked her to stay for coffee—I’d left a sweet taste in her mouth when she’d prefer a bitter one, and April nights could still be cold. She’d need something to warm her up and give her energy. And once we’d sipped our cups to the lukewarm dregs, curled on the couch and the armchair, night breezes pushed against the old timbers of the house.

“It’s late,” she said. “I should—”

“Please, wait.”

She sat, unmoving, watching me. Looking back, I think there was a hopeful look on her face, barely visible in the camping lantern’s moonlike glow. I raced through possibilities, any leftover reasons for her to stay. Because that was the real thing each one of us asked the other—

may I stay? Will you stay?—our requests moving around it in dancelike steps.¹⁵ “You know that I’m an artist,” I said, slowly. She nodded, leaned forward. “I’m trying to hear stories from people. Could I hear one from you?”

“I—” She blinked. “From me? Why?”

“Because—” I like you. I think you’re beautiful, and entrancing. I want you to stay here just a little longer. “Well, you’re a mer. You represent a, um, a unique perspective.”

“Ah.” I watched her watch her folded hands. Her long pink eyelashes were silver in the light of the lantern. When she looked back up, her dark eyes flicked between mine. “I’d need a few days to make it, to make the _____.”¹⁶ I couldn’t understand the word from her father’s language, This was before I began recording, before we started translating together, so it was lost. “The songstory, I mean.”

“A few days sounds perfect,” I said then.

And now, in the present, after she tucked her hair behind her ears, unselfconscious of her gills? After we found yet another reason to delay her departure? “A long story sounds perfect,” I said again. “I’ll be here until next May—I mean, until around this time next year. We have time.”

The chill of early spring pressed through the floorboards, the walls, but seemed to stop at our feet. Outside, mist climbed the mossy pines. Even the moon was a pale smudge of itself. In the last few months, I’d woken so often to the loneliness of undisturbed fog outside my windows, the frigid stiffness of untouched air within the house itself. Scatterings of snow marked only by

¹⁵ Jon has a house. Jon has a shower. Jon has food. Fshwiw has none of those things. And Jon assumes that Fshwiw wants to stay because she’s just as interested in *him* as he is in her. He thinks there’s already some grand romance going on that both of them are aware of, and I don’t know.

Maybe I’m biased. Sylvia was more or less in the same situation the first time I invited her in. But I’m not like Jon. I didn’t expect anything in return from Sylvia. I only hoped for it.

¹⁶ *Sshu ’n’in*. Irresponsible translating work.

bird feet. The staleness of late winter had settled into my fingertips and left me salt-soaked and blinded. Tools clumsy in my hands, joy clumsy in my body.

But if I could, I realized—if I could, I would walk in her warm footsteps on the wood floor. I would find where the wildflowers and ferns sprung up at the roadsides, in the ditches, in the meadows, and I would carry them home to set them in a drinking glass. I would taste the sunlit air atop the blue-green sea. I would crack and creak and grow. For the first time, I felt time shifting in the land, and me shifting along with it. This was something that could be known. I smiled at Fshwiw. If she carried the sea and these islands within her, then I would endeavor to shoulder her stories as well.

I had no idea of their weight.

As we went to bed that night—after I put out the candles with my fingertips, and Fshwiw fretted that I could be hurt—she lingered outside the door of her guest bedroom, and I hesitated outside of the master's. In the dark and the quiet, I could hear her breathing, the sound mingling with my own breath. After a moment, my inhales matched to hers, or hers to mine—and, somewhere in the distance, the sea washed, inaudible, against the shore.

Chapter 2

Where the Moon Calls

(2017; shaped driftwood, fishing line, and iron fittings)

White twigs, woven close, spiral out into smooth branches, larger limbs, near-trunks.

Stand beneath, and growth becomes a deadfall.

A wave does not begin when it arches over the shore, ready to fall—a wave begins somewhere out in the deep, out in the empty places where the moon calls and the tide must obey. It is right that stories should start there as well. Why did my mother leaving not bring me peace? For that, you must first know my mother. *[t/n: Even in her native tongue, which swooshes and hisses a rhythmic story, Fshwiw is adept at intonation. Though I didn't understand her initial telling—or any of her language besides a few words—I could readily understand her bitterness.]*

My mother did not dress my hair in silence. Stories, memories—those were her treasures, just as much as any of the baubles in her wooden box. The sea devoured that box day by day. First the sunrise-colored paint, most of it gone before I was born, and then the carvings, some of them crumbling beneath my fingers, and—someday in the future—the box will slump and sweep away and leave only the piles of precious things inside. Moldering in their little carved grotto alongside her hand mirror, gone all green. She left so quickly. She didn't take them.

When my mother dressed my hair, I fragmented the box beneath my fingernails with unconscious, nervous little scratches. Pink and orange paint flecks caught under my nails. Once, a splinter in my thumb. The box decayed, and her stories flourished. While my hair sought to swirl away in the current—long rosy curls tendriling out in front of my face, wild—my mother caught it, pinched it between her fingers, and spoke: *The sun here scarcely touches anything.*

She's frigid. Or, when I came here with your father, I thought he would have a family waiting for us. Or, I cannot believe you've never tasted a mango. You've never had something sweet, ah, such deprivation.

She'd lean closer to my ear, my hair caught up in her hands. I had to listen. *Dep-ri-va-tion. That means poverty, which means you do not have what you need to be happy, to live well.*

As though my mother's childhood taught her anything about living well in any little way, as though a home could be built from sunlight and sweetness. What happens after dusk? What happens when you drag saltwater over your gills? Childhood had only taught my mother how to hide, and how to flee. *[t/n: I confess I was surprised when Fshwiw started narrating her mother's life. My own mother's past is a blank, passed on only through negation: we did not have grandparents, she did not have a happy childhood, she did not have time to tell us about it. I stopped being curious about her upbringing—and my father's, too—a long time ago. The fewer connections I had with them, the better.*

I tried to be tactful in my critique. "I really want to hear more about your life."

"This was my life," Fshwiw said. "She made her life into my life."]

Here is how it was: mornings in the still sea, blue and calm as a handsome man's drowned eye. My mother swirled among her bright-finned cousins as though they were braiding the warm water, chatting, laughing, tossing children's songs back and forth like seashells. Changing the words to gossiping rhymes. Aunts and uncles shouted after them—*careful, not too far, not too far*—and, grumbling, the cousins returned to the reefs.¹⁷ Only to begin straying again,

¹⁷ When the Aycayia Collective first began pushing for recognition as a nation, people (both locals and tourists) started pushing back. The idea back then was that sirens were cowards, only interested in manipulating good people into sexual encounters and stealing their stuff afterwards, if not their lives. Some people still think this, obviously, but at least it's mostly moved into the "stereotype" category, meaning that it still influences legal policy, but people are (usually) quieter about it. In any case, because people thought that sirens were these violent, erotic not-people, attacks weren't uncommon. You had to be careful about what fishermen you trusted, and you couldn't swim too close to the surface, according to the 1989 documentary *We Sing So You Will Listen*.

spiraling out into the calm sea and back again to the blooming corals that the sirens so lovingly sang into shape, into twining, tussling life.

Sometimes, a pair of older cousins slipped past the gauntlet of watchful relatives and out through the reefs, speeding towards the low-slung island with its salt-cracked docks and small, colorfully-painted fishing boats. They charmed the fishermen, their wives. *Just a mango to share with my little sister. A pineapple, could you? It's her birthday. A papaya, a chirimoya? Even a lemon, if you think she's too sweet.*¹⁸ Fruit splashed down—lithe cousins darted for the citrus bobbing on the surface like bright round birds, dived for the papayas and mangoes sinking, slow stones. (People—strangers—really did throw stones once. My mother watched a female cousin as she sang closed a cut over the unlucky one's eye. In the end, not even a scar remained. Stones were rare, fortunately--spitting in the sea was more common). But on good days, the cousins gathered the fruit all up in a green nylon net, let them bounce together on the trip home. There'd be no time for bruises to show on the rinds.

They split the bounty on the flat, warm stones that only showed at low tide, shared to every round and slender hand among the cousins. My mother's hands in those days, hesitant. Tight little fists, no pink palm skin showing, even when the juice-scent—fresh, sweet, memory of flowers turned feast—perfumed the air. My mother, pursed lips, until an older cousin pressed a cube of mango into her hands. *Waiting to see if we're poisoned? Eat, dumb baitfish.* So my mother ate. She told me that the taste lived on her tongue even years later, even after I was born and grew in the dark. The taste of summer—and her childhood was all summer.

One way my mother lied—as long as I sat still and listened to her stories, her life was only beauty. The instant I turned away, though, the instant I pulled at her hand or looked

¹⁸ Listening to these recordings was wild—Fshwiw sings in *hsifsh* right up until “mango” or “pineapple,” and then it's just the English. “*Wiwfr-shw hsi khrr uk mango.*” Really helped with the translation, actually.

longingly at the warm greenery outside our home, hurricanes descended. Whirlpools and tempests. Dark gray skies, blackening seas, a million striking bolts. I tell it to you all together, but imagine the stories of injuries like boxes beneath a bed, not still, but rattling and scraping. Impatient to spill. What treasures inside, how they would leap out as soon as my mother opened them. *[t/n: I took Fshwiw's hand in this moment. It was all too easy to understand—my mother looked to me and my sisters as shields against my father. We seized his legs and clutched his wrists and cried, but his rage only grew louder and less discerning. Still, we cared for our mother, and in the end, she left us behind. Just as Angelic left Fshwiw. I told Fshwiw this, and she squeezed my fingers.]*

But for now, summer. All through the afternoon hot as breath, my mother basked on the tidal rocks among the chorus of her cousins' murmuring voices. *You're untidy, cousin.* One of them massaged oil into her scalp and fixed her hair into stylish knots, like button coral—this attention was an advantage of being the baby, my mother told me, and she kissed my braids. Their hands lulled her into half-sleep. She woke only enough to flick away the tiny black crabs that picked their way over the stone. They vanished—*plop*—into the water, and one of her more tenderhearted cousins would flick her ear in retribution. *Just ask them to leave you alone, Angelic.* My mother rolled her eyes beneath her closed lids. The sun shone through, hibiscus-red, the color so different from the sea that it calmed my mother back into sleep.

She had hours yet. Hours until the waves swallowed the sun.

My mother left her chores for last. When all her cousins had slipped from the rocks and the rocks themselves slipped below the cool rising tide, my mother descended back to the reefs, back to the sickly little patch of coral and sponges for which she was the sole guardian. Only the most dedicated sirens remained, now that the sun was so low to the horizon and supper so close

in their minds. An old, old grandfather type whose orange scales were fading to ochre, coaxing his brain coral—a middle-aged aunt and her wife,¹⁹ humming together over their twining garden—a young aunt in a soaked denim shirt and gold rings.

The young aunt, Miraculous, called to my mother once: “Isn’t it late, Angelic? La-zy-bones.” She sang the last word, and the branching coral she attended to seemed to shimmer. My mother hunched over her coral, their weakly waving little arms pink as her hair. She murmured—“grow, heal, flourish and change”—but the tiny creatures didn’t shift, didn’t stretch out their many limbs or deepen their color or shift towards her voice. If anything, they paled in the deepening twilight. A young parrotfish the size of my mother’s hand pecked at them. Angelic swatted at it. “Get away!”

“Hey, hey.” Miraculous dodged the fish as it wove madly away. “It’s trying to help, same as you.”

“It’s eating my coral.”

“There’s gunk on your coral. That’s what it’s eating.”

She pointed past Angelic, at the green-brown fuzz that rimmed the coral’s edge. The aunt’s presence just behind Angelic cast a darker shadow. Angelic stared straight ahead, at the bony roots of the coral, the parts that she, at least, wasn’t responsible for keeping alive any longer. Miraculous rested a hand on her shoulder. Her rings warmed Angelic’s skin. “You have

¹⁹ Queer siren relationships have gotten a lot of attention (good and bad, and historically, mostly bad) from landfolk, to the point that historian and siren Solace Buendia wrote this in the foreword to *Oral Histories of the Aycayia*:

Queer subjectivities, insomuch as queerness is a deviation from standard societal forms, have characterized Aycayia narratives from our earliest origins: we are from the seven sisters who rejected marriage from a greedy, powerful man (in some tellings, a hurricane spirit). When he flooded their home, they sang themselves into forms befitting the sea. They sang tails for their lovers, their husbands, their wives. They lived, and when they died, they sang themselves into the Pleiades. Yet the most notable stories in maintaining this theme are (relatively) modern ones, which have arisen as responses, as opposition, to settler narratives that posited queerness as a kind of *casus belli*. These constitute Part III of this anthology, and include the 1693 transcribed memoir *Syren Testimony of Love Beneath the Waves* (rediscovered in 1946 in the bombed-out basement of a Parisian erotic antiques shop), the 1868 speech “A Civil Influence,” and the 1979 pirate radio broadcast *I’m Your Cannibal Dyke/Soy Tu Tortillera Caníbal*.

to believe what you're saying. And you have to know that you can help. Sing with that, and you can't go wrong."

My mother twisted her hands in her salt-bleached top. The many ribbons Miraculous had sewn to the bottom of her denim shirt spun out into the current, shining and new and impossible to get without speaking to a lubber. Why would this help, she wanted to ask. Why her voice. But Miraculous patted her once and said, "You'll get it." And left.

When her tail—deep blue stripes on lighter blue—had flickered out of sight, my mother leaned close to her coral. *Shiver*, she whisper-sang. *Shiver, scrape, surge past*. The coral flinched, trembled. A few scraps of furred algae drifted to the white sand below. My mother smiled. She learned.

My mother used to learn. Now, her nostrils flared. Now, she spat into an oncoming wave. Now, she hissed lubber language where all my father's people could hear, dragging me above their homes. One arm hooked through mine, insistent and resolute enough that I could barely keep hold on our covered basket of cockles. They tumbled within the woven weeds, rattling like teeth.

"The way they live," she said, glaring down into the homes below and spooking a boy with mud-yellow curls, "All separate, with just enough room to spy."²⁰

I said nothing, though I had much to say. Not separate, not spying—the sea moves through, and everyone else as well, when they are welcome. My mother didn't see this. She wove kelp-frond curtains and secured them over each portal in our house, pinned them at the bottom with stones. They stretched, sails, and soon tattered to nothing. She made them again, and

²⁰ Salish mer architecture hasn't changed much, so we can look to abandoned villages to see what Angelic means. A mer home usually has a central room marked by a large, round opening in the ceiling, and that main space branches off into a few little round rooms which may or may not have "portals" of their own. In large villages, like the half-ruined one in Case Inlet, these homes cluster together and tessellate outwards, forming a structure a lot like some mounding corals.

again, stripping the stalks beside our home. For a few days after each addition, it seemed the sea held its breath in our home. My mother did not want to learn.

“At home,” she said—and still when I hear “home” in a lubber tongue, I see the warm blue waters of a place that I’ve never been, and when I hear “home” in my father’s language, I smell the tides moving through the groves— “At home, we all had our own places, our own bodies. We created ourselves. That’s how it should be.”

At home, my mother lived among concentric coral rings pocked with archways invisible to passing boats. At the farthest reach, miles out, lay a perimeter wall sung into form by the sirens and topped with mountainous star coral that just brushed the surface at low tide. To stop the waves, my mother said, to keep us calm and lazy, she laughed when she felt nostalgic—but no, the walls were not only for the waves. If they were only for the waves, why would sirens sing the coral around broken bottles and twisted metal, as my mother told me when she felt less grateful? Why would they point those sharp edges out into the blue beyond, towards lubbers and their little boats?

But within the perimeter, a wonderland. Every rock, every stone, every bit of lubber flotsam and jetsam grown over with corals and sponges and anemones, swirling with reef fish as though the coral broke apart into bright-hued bits and dodged through the water. The little ones were not the only residents. There, a spotted ray skating along, sending puffs of white sand up behind him. There, a turtle with liquid eyes in a flurry of yellow fish like gold coins. There, a silver barracuda hanging motionless, waiting.

And there, a wreck of a lubber boat, more coral now than wood, more life in its walls than within them. Certainly, my grandmother waited there for my mother—the wreck passed for their home—but I don’t think my mother ever considered this much of a life. We won’t go inside

just yet. *[t/n: Despite her description of a ship underwater, I saw my father's house at first, battered periwinkle paint, a tarp over the upstairs window. When I got home in the blue dusk, the lit ember of a cigarette marked where my father sat on the porch. I resisted the urge to ask Fshwiw to cut this story out entirely, to fast forward the recording to something that felt safer. I did not want to have anything in common with her mother. But in the end, I didn't ask. It was easier not to explain, because it was her story to tell, wasn't it? She always made sure that it was her story.]*

Beyond the first circle lay another high siren-sung barrier, populated by a fleet of sunken fishing boats harvested from centuries of storms and ill fortune, all of them now lashed together with their own nets to make happy homes. Another barricade after that, and another, growing closer and closer together, until the heart of my mother's community—a labyrinth of coral arches and portals amidst swooping partitions. A garden, cultivated for beauty instead of merely for food. Staghorn coral latticed overhead, forming a sunlit net through which the reef fish could come and go as they pleased. The wide paths—undulating with seagrasses, young conchs stretching their orange mouths over the sand—gave way to walls blooming with bright sponges and sea fans. Sirens sang their homes from the coral here over generations. They sang grottos into brain corals that were taller than a man, set them glowing from within with well-chosen harmonies to illuminate the tiny creatures. They coaxed barrel sponges into gigantic spaces with trilling vocal runs until they could curl and sleep beneath wide shelves of table corals stacked with jars and favored trinkets. Treasures adorned each entryway, golden crosses on fine chains, stopped pocketwatches, silver spectacles, even ordinary coins, polished bright—all winking to invite guests, even as the last of the sunlight vanished into blue twilight and my mother passed by the little sea-cottages with low laughter spilling out through the walls.

No more hours, no more time. She dragged her fingers through the silky sand of the shallows, spiraling out from the center of the gardens, returning home. Corals that had slept during the day reached out their little hands now. My mother passed through the first archway into the ring beyond, away from her cousins and their gifts of fruit, away from the gentle conversation in the oldest homes. She stayed distant from the sunken fishing boats and their many hurricane lanterns filled with soft glowing corals, pink purple green phantasms in the dusk. If she went closer, her cousins would invite her in, but the moon was rising. She was late, always, worrying, always. Sometimes, a young reef shark swam alongside her, its crescent mouth drawn into a nearly-nervous frown, and she felt comforted.²¹ Most nights, she returned alone.

Down the slow slope into deeper darkness. Her home's crumbling silhouette resolved from the shadows, masts cracked, bow collapsed. During good times, my grandmother Thousand told my mother, the ship had been a beauty. Her own grandmother said it once had sails like summer clouds. Its captain coveted a siren ancestor, and so he haunted the shallow seas, hunting her. But when he netted her, she sang his men into mutiny. Armed with shovels, axes, even galley knives, they attacked their own hull, battering at the wood as the sea swirled in around their ankles, their knees, their necks. The captain knew how to swim, struggled up from the dragging waters towards the surface and the sunlight. His own net closed around him, and he died with his fingers stretching past the knots. My mother's family made their home in a grave.

"Is it true?" I asked my mother once. She sighed, shrugged, passed me her hand mirror.

"I never found any bones," she said.

²¹ Contrary to popular depictions of coral reefs as wonderlands where residents live in happy-shiny safety and where a shark's arrival is akin to a serial killer's, the presence of apex predators like sharks actually indicates a healthy ecosystem. There's enough food to keep them fed, which means that the rest of the food web is in pretty good shape as well. Hostile folktales from the 1700s onward sometimes include rumors of "song-bewitched sharks" patrolling outside siren settlements, but it's also pretty likely that the sharks were just there because it was the best place to get a meal.

I gazed into the mirror, seeing my mother in my face, wondering if that meant I saw this ancestor also.

[t/n: I asked Fshwiw—“So, do you think that it’s true?” She tugged at one of her ringlets, stretching it and letting it spring back. “Maybe,” she said. “Do you think less of me? Do you think it’s an awful story?” She met my gaze and glanced away. I studied the line of her jaw.

“No,” I said. I wanted to comfort her, even though the account of her mother’s life was still making my skin itch. Her shoulders relaxed. “No, I think it’s a good story. A story doesn’t have to be true to be good.”]

My mother’s childhood home had several entrances, only one of them purposeful—the remnants of a door to the lower deck, unmarked by anything that caught the light. No watches or coins or whiskey flasks. The other portals were merely the result of rot and coral growing wild wherever it pleased. When my mother needed to satisfy Thousand, she slipped through the main way and looked around, knowing her own mother was waiting somewhere. Thousand’s yellow-green eyes, so like my mother’s eyes, gleamed at her through the dark. Her gaze stiffened my mother’s limbs, caught her stomach and squeezed it. My mother shared stories about these encounters after arguments with my father. Here is one conversation my mother told me while her hands were deep in my curls, looping and braiding:

“So you learned to dress your own hair, finally?” Thousand always spoke first.

“No, Elixir did it.” Angelic kept her voice small.

“You let him? People will think I haven’t taught you anything. They’ll think you’re simple. Are you simple? Don’t let a man touch your hair.”

“He’s not a man, he’s my age.”

“Then he has the devil in him too.”

And another:

“It’s late. Where have you been? Who were you with?”

“No one—I had my chores, the gardens—”

“Liar. What is wrong with you? Slut.”

And another:

“You were easier as a baby.”

I didn’t know what to say when my mother told me these stories. *Scratch scratch*, my tiny fingernails in the box of treasures. *That’s awful, Mama*. My gills flicked open, shut. A feeling like the words I needed weren’t in me. *Why would she say that?* A feeling like I was looking down into the rift again, waiting for something to emerge and swallow me whole, something far worse than any of the songstories. *That’s horrible*.

“No,” my mother said. “You don’t know what horrible is.”

Horrible, my mother said, was remembering nothing at all. Horrible was most of her early childhood, a haze of sleeping and waking. Sunlight through the timbers above her head, little red fish swimming between the mossy corals. Blinking eyes, a realization of fingertips and fins. Lips cracking, calling out. And then Thousand’s voice, singing, strong as a rip current, pulling her into—moonlight through the timbers, little silver fish. Something in her hands, a comb, a set of ribbons. Soreness at the base of her neck. Calling: “Mama?” And her mother’s voice again, raised in song that trembled up her spine and shut her eyes. Years later, Thousand would say it was only a lullaby, and my mother would call her a liar. But in those days, my mother slept and sleepswam. Tranced beyond all sense of self.

Until the storm. Until hurricane waves rolled deep over the reef, shattering pieces of the wall, sending them raining down onto the softened wood and coral of the wreck. My mother woke—truly woke—to a drenched, groaning creak. *Snap*. The reef fell in on her. A piece of stinging coral pressed into her arm, her cheek, burning her. She screamed, but the waves passed through, carrying the hours with them, scattering her voice like sand. Alone. In the dark, watching the waves swirl, thinking the storm carried echoes of her mother's voice. *Sleep, forget, sleep, forget.*

As far as I know, siren voices do not hold in the water like the songs of my father's people. The sea recognizes the sound of itself and holds the stories in their currents, as it is asked to do. But were a siren to sing long enough and often enough, even their notes would hold fast in the waves and the walls. Angelic, my mother, caught beneath the new wreckage of the storm, heard these dozens of phantom lullabies, a thousand Thousands, whispering in her ears—*sleep and forget, Angelic*. But as the splintered wood and coral dug into her tail and her belly, as the fire coral branded her face and her arm, my mother only listened to her own voice howling along with the roaring waves. Wide-awake, she watched the eye of the hurricane pass over her. Moment of silence, moment of peace. She did not forget.

A pair of uncles, out to examine the damage done to the wall, heard her weak voice crying out and pulled her from the wreckage. The fire coral had stung her deeply. "A burn from here to here," my mother told me, drawing her hand down my cheek and arm, "And Thousand nowhere to be found."

What she earned from her wound: a few days of contentment in the brain coral home of an elderly couple, a few days of lubber delicacies eaten on the tidal rocks (fresh red snapper with lemon juice and a smear of jealously guarded hot sauce, cold cans of passionfruit juice,

chocolate-covered peanuts), a few days of sirens singing calm repair into her swollen face. And a few days, too, of marveling at her memories, the lingering tastes of her meals, the searching brown eyes of the aunt who combed back her pink hair to check for scarring, the watery *thwock* of her young aunt Miraculous knocking a cousin on the head after he said that Angelic's face looked like a guava slice. The stories from the elderly couple, Nectar and Maria—Maria who had walked on lubber legs and worn high-collared dresses in her youth, who had laughed at the strange harbor siren's jokes, who had smiled when she saw his handsome gap-toothed smile. Maria, who had traded her legs for the lilac tail of a landsick, lovesick siren (who fell into her own love's widespread arms, whose story is somewhere but lost to me). Maria, who had traded her legs for Nectar.²² My mother stared up at them from the sandy floor as they agreed on the details of every memory.

Of course, her mother returned before a week passed. Her panicked voice bounced from reef to reef. *Angelic? Angelic? Where is my daughter?* And though Maria and Nectar kept my mother behind them, Thousand sobbed and scraped against the ground and begged for a glimpse of her child. She'd told Angelic to meet her at the western reefs on the far side of the island to weather the storm—of course she'd never leave her only daughter in the wreck—of course she'd been searching the coastlines for days, barely eating, not even sleeping.

Voices murmuring, scales reflecting bright sunlight. The sirens pressed closer, listening. Maria held Angelic's hand, bent so she was on a level with the young girl. *Is it true, Angelic?* And my mother, whose memory was the empty blue of the open ocean, had to say, *I don't know, I don't know, I don't remember.*

²² Before the Aycayia Collective gained recognition, these trades were informal and even clandestine, much like the one Fshwiw had with Sylvia or the one described here with Maria and an unknown siren. Now, barter is highly-regulated. Thousands of people worldwide seek to exchange their legs for a tail, and when a siren wishes to go ashore, a dozen of the likeliest candidates are brought to the Caribbean to live with the community. A dozen. Out of thousands. What chance did someone like Sylvia have?

Thousand carried my mother in silence out through the central rings of coral, but when the wreck loomed out of the twilight sea, her low hum—soothing, strong—shook the water between them, rumbled into Angelic’s bones. Her mother smoothed her stray curls back from her forehead. “Sleep, Angelic. Sleep, my darling, and forget.”

The song carried the inexorable force of a deep current, but it washed over Angelic’s ears like a spent wave. She lay stiff in Thousand’s arms, staring up at the woman. The cloud of pale gold hair catching the light. The shadowed, lined face. Her eyes, looking up and away, not at her daughter at all. My mother thought, *I do not know you*, and when Thousand finally glanced at her, Thousand saw the thought written on her face. Saw the thought, and the fear. Saw the knowledge that her voice could never touch her daughter again, and so let Angelic drift from her arms outside the ship, leaving my mother to find her own place to sleep in the haunted wreck.

On some nights in the years that followed, my mother sang open a wider space in the coral and wiggled out into the open water, promising repair to the wounded creatures as soon as she returned (and did it thrive, or was it bony and brittle? My mother never said). Sometimes Angelic fetched a cousin or two to bring with her, but more often she swam straight for the surface and its smudges of starlight, and when she broke the surface and breathed air again at last, she felt lifted—not as though a wave carried her up, but as though she were the wave or the moon calling it. At night, a cool breeze carried the scent of the island out over the sea, and when she was alone, my mother closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Wet soil, and dew gathering on leaves. Trees, sighing, and a million animals crossing paths in the dark. Frying lubber food, smoke and oil, the smells carried out with lubber laughter that was just a whisper by the time it reached my mother.

When she brought her cousins, they intertwined their elbows and took each other's hands, squeezing her cold fingers until they warmed. My mother's hair drifted out behind her and tangled with her cousins'. One of them hummed a lubber song that no one knew all the words to. A voice would raise to sing a line and then murmur back into silence or a low argument about the lyrics. They floated there, stars like seafoam above them, stars glimmering in the seafoam alongside them as though they were part of the sky. Not a raft on the waves, but a constellation. Something more lasting, something permanent. But the winds changed by morning, chasing the scent of the island back to solid earth. The stars faded.

On some nights in the years that followed, when she was alone on the waves, my mother sang her own siren songs to herself. *Remember. Remember. Please, remember.*

Scars are their own kinds of memories. Scars say, there is a thing called harm, and this body has known it. In my father's village, evidence of old injuries enstoried tails and limbs. Uurwa's twisted, shining scar spoke of a hunting accident, a close call with lubbers. The swirling white tracks on a woman's arm—an encounter with an eel in an abandoned home. The deep scrapes in a hunter's tail that marred the pattern of coppery speckles—waves slamming him against rough stones. The mother's missing tooth—childhood stupidity. *[t/n: It was late in the evening, and we'd had a couple beers each. I showed her the long white line that snaked up my bicep and disappeared beneath my t-shirt sleeve. I'd been trying to jump a chain-link fence, get some breathing room from my father. She pointed to a warped burn, origins unknown, on the top of her foot. I lifted my shirt—her eyes widened—to show her the pockmarks from spitting oil. Nine years old, hot summer morning, and I'd been trying to fix breakfast. She held out her hands for inspection. Thread-thin white rings encircled each digit, wrapped around her wrist. "What are*

these from?” I asked. She laughed in response: “Do you think that the first time I sang flesh from flesh was when I took off the lubber’s legs? I had to practice somehow.” I remember realizing, with a sudden coldness through the warm alcohol buzz, just how badly she’d wanted to get out.]

And of course, there were the hands of everyone in the village, save for my mother and—until recently—myself. On the hunters, lumpy scar tissue like rings from the nets they dragged. On the mothers and the children, a scattering of fine silver marks like stars from plucking sea urchins, day after day, from the kelp they gnawed. Off the kelp, into the basket, outside the village, and then back again the next morning. You could be careful, if you chose—sooner or later, a spine would slip through the glove.²³

Yet my mother had no scars, not from the fire coral nor from anything else. Her stories were all that we could show for them. When a purple urchin stung me—three spines in my palm—my mother sang away any trace of pain, any brief memory of a wound. Some hurts can be sung away, but some persist, invisible, under the skin. Festering, or else scarring so deeply that you can’t feel anything at all.

“Why don’t I look like them?” I asked my mother as we cracked open crabs and shredded their soft meat. I must have been around four or five, and I used an old, dull knife of my father’s. My mother used her bare hands. Eager little fish darted around our fingers, pecking at specks of

²³ Sea otters are a keystone species of kelp ecosystems. They keep sea urchin populations down, and as a result, the urchins don’t overgraze the kelp and turn the seafloor into a wasteland. No kelp, no shelter, no survival. The maritime fur trade decimated otter populations, with the last sea otter native to Washington (that we know of) killed in 1910. New populations were introduced along the coasts in the 1960s and 70s, but you only get a few lost otters wandering into the Sound. So, Fshwiw’s people fill the role of sea otters as well as the role of merfolk, and they’ve done it for probably close to two centuries. They pluck urchins from the kelp. They eat urchins more than they’d like. They spend a lot of time on it.

The Upwelling’s stories go back thousands of years, Fshwiw said. That means there are stories about what life was like when the Salish Sea, including Puget Sound, still had its otters. Ambassadors from the air-breathing world, keeping the kelp forests healthy. How did her people talk about the otters? How did they spend all that time where they’d be gathering urchins? Making art, singing new songs, re-singing the old songs that were turning ragged?

And when the otters began to vanish, did her people suffer those first few winters without any new pelts for the smallest children? Did killing the otters kill the empty villages, the ones tourists dive to?

flesh that floated free. I had once again failed to make friends—held out my hands to Hsssh, only for her to place her fingers next to mine. Smooth brown skin against dappled green, pockmarked with shiny pink. She giggled and swam away, leaving me looking over myself as though trying to find a missing piece.

“Because you’re different,” she said, not looking up from her work. With a stuttering *crack*, another crab lay open on her pink-scaled lap, split by her flawless hands. “You’re like me.”

What do you do when you are born a stranger in the only land you know? When the water you breathe seems to carry the whispers of a village, when rumors stick in your gills until you think you might suffocate? What do you do when your glances meet hard-eyed gazes, or worse, when stares slide past you as though you are nothing but an eddy, a stray fin-flip? You think, who is the self and who is the stranger—and if I am the stranger, and it seems that I am, then where is my self?

Out somewhere among the kelp groves, wavering among the ribboning fronds, wavering at children’s shouts and their quick shadows between the green stalks, their bubbling laughter and their swishing fins when they reach out to touch—to tag—*chase me, find me, you can’t even see me*. Wavering, my little self, as though bound to disappear. And if my self were not there, not in the groves, then it was tucked away in a sea cave where the walls shimmered with wave-light and where the voice spoke to itself, an echoing conversation. Or else hidden in a dark little grotto ringed by anemones, floor and ceiling, their ghostly pale arms searching out from brilliant scarlet centers. Or else left in those tidepools with the shiny-shelled crabs, or else carried away in a gull’s beak—

Carried away in a gull's beak, because after the Upwelling, after my mother took me above the waves, I did not think I was seen the same. I had known air in my lungs, I had known a lightness within, and so when I looked into my father's eyes, I thought he could see in mine the entirety of the pale gold sky, the thousand beating wings. I thought my memories were like the surface of the sea—that when you hold yourself steady and look in just the right way, then a circle of sky will appear with all the clarity of the world above, so fine that you could trace the edges of a cloud or count the scattered stars [*t/n: for lubbers, this phenomenon is known as Snell's window*].²⁴ Soon, my father would see the line of the land inside me, the trees and the spaces between them. Soon, he would know that I had changed, and he would withdraw from me. He would leave me, let my mother's current carry me away.²⁵

It was not only a child's superstition. After the Upwelling, village mothers looked at me slantwise when I passed, their fingers pausing over nets half-mended and urchins half-plucked from kelp holdfasts. I heard their children in the groves, as I have said, but I never quite found them. Hunters frowned, laid their hands on my father's shoulders as though they would pull him away from me. But my father simply pushed back any of my loose braids with a scarred hand and smiled, his dark eyes distracted, and though the village had seen my mother drag me from the Upwelling and mark me as a stranger, they did not know about the air that had lived so recently in my lungs. From this, I learned that secrets are not so easily seen. They are the chambers of a snailshell—only suggestions, until the shell splits.

²⁴ And based on the recordings, for Fshwiw's people, this is called *s'hsi-wir*. *Wir* is eye and *s'hsi* is ocean (literally, "huge being" or "all of being, all of existence"), so they're "the eyes of the ocean."

²⁵ According to Fshwiw, Salish cosmology holds that a child abandoned by a birth parent will be unable to "swim in their current," meaning not only that their legacy will be lost, but the child's life will not receive any guidance from their life's spirit. They will be lost, or "drifting." A child with too many influences, on the other hand (like one who's born from an affair, or even someone who's adopted) is at risk of snarling up the currents, being crushed and torn apart.

This is a secret about how my parents loved each other: They did it carefully, or not at all. Carefully, as though they danced in a sea hung with fishhooks. Carefully, because when my father left on a hunt, I could feel the water around my mother settle. Carefully, in that when one of them spoke, the other fell silent. And my mother was often the one who spoke.

When the spring tides rolled in after my first Upwelling, I asked my mother: “Can I listen to the songs again?”

“You’re not their daughter,” she said, not looking up from the pale ribbon she stitched onto her vest. “So, no.”

Later—an hour or a month, I don’t know, since time moves differently for children—I asked my father the same question. He scratched at his chin with a scarred hand and stared at me for a long while without answering. My gills fluttered with nervous breaths. I was at the age where I still believed a parent could know everything.

“Go ask your mother,” he said finally.

And then, when my parents loved each other not at all, the water grew heavy as the midnight depths of a trench, pressing on my neck and my lungs alike. When we ate together, my father complimented the food and then said, “Spring currents will be here soon. The Upwelling should—” and my mother set down the bite of white flesh that was halfway to her mouth and said, “Fshwiw. Bed,” even though the light outside was golden. *[t/n: “What? Why?” My mother had always kept me close, a hand on my shoulder in case I tried to run to the bedroom like I had when I was very small. Fshwiw blinked up at me. “I don’t know.” The rest of her body had gone very still. “Why do you ask?” I shook myself free of the beer we’d drunk, told her never mind, suggested we stop for the night. In bed, I stared up at the ceiling, wondering what it was like to have someone protect you, even in the tiniest possible ways.]*

Or else my mother fixed my father with her yellow eyes after not looking at him for the entire evening, and she asked, “You were only heading to the inlet. Why does that take three days whenever you hunt with Uurwa?” And my father would chew and swallow and sigh. He looked at me. “Fshwiw, did you see the choir practicing today? Did you get to hear their song?” My mother slammed her hand next to the food, carrying seaweed and fish on the wave she created. Such a little shift in the water, but it felt like a maelstrom, and I barely heard her when she told me to go to bed.

Or else, or else, or else. A thousand retellings, a thousand little eddies and surges building to the wave that crashed down on our home as soon as I found my way to my bedroom. The slower I swam, the longer I kept it hovering above us. I traced my fingers along the carvings in the wall, the ones my grandfather had carved for his wife and his daughters and his only son. They seemed less than lumps beneath my fingers. My father said he had no time to make them new again, though—the elder hunters called him often to the hunts, or maybe he asked to be called.

Behind me, Mama and Papa sat across from each other, the remains of our dinner scattered on the woven mat between them.

I heard them—they kept their voices low, but I couldn’t help hearing them. The crackling, hissing swirl of their voices starting to overlap like two currents colliding. I curled under my sealskin cover, held my hands over my ears. I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want to know what they called each other, but as with the Upwelling, I had no choice.

When my father’s voice began to rise, reverberating in the walls and floor of the house, when I caught him saying that my mother was raising me to be an outcast like he’d been an outcast, that my mother would drive me away from the village more surely than any song ever

would, when he stopped caring that I would hear him or wanted me to hear him—then my mother would begin to sing.

Something soothing. Something strong. Something inescapable, like being carried in arms that could kill you. The melody vibrated through my bones, echoed in my skull, seemed to shake the entire house. My mother's voice was the only thing in the ocean. I dropped out of consciousness. A lullaby. Her oldest and strongest song.

In the morning, my father sat by the empty eating place or curled in a corner of the house where fading stone fish swam above his head. His eyes, when he opened them, had a glaze over their dark surface. He greeted me, ate the food I placed in front of him, and left our home, all without a single glint of himself. When I looked at him growing smaller with distance, I thought of an empty shell drifting across the ocean floor, carried by the waves so far above it. There was nothing in him but the sea. Siren songs could be coarse things, like sharkskin, dragging against the fine tissues of your mind. Making you remember or forget, shaping you into someone else entirely. Stealing your catch, stealing your heart, piece by rasping piece. Coarse, subtle, and slow. My mother scraped him away and then slept until the sun was high overhead, as though she'd done nothing at all, as though her secret didn't live in our home.

I asked my mother many times why she did it, and her answer was always the same—*I'm protecting you. [t/n: Fshwiw faltered when she spoke here, and her eyes dipped down. "Fshwiw, is that it? Is that all she said?" Her mouth twisted. "Fshwiw?" At last, she spoke. "No. No, it isn't all she said. But I can't—I didn't prepare a verse—"* She blinked, her eyes welling up. *I got her a glass of water from the kitchen. After the night before, I needed to be gentler, to protect her the way she actually needed, the way I wanted to be protected too.]* Once, I asked my father why

she did it. He didn't answer me at all. He just looked at the scars on his hands where the ropes had dug in. He could never explain my mother's myriad cruelties, but he told me other stories when my mother was out somewhere or still asleep—those rare moments she left me alone. He spoke slowly at first, coming back to himself. I watched life reemerge in his gaze like a spring tide running through the kelp groves.

When my father went on the long hunts, the hunts beyond the sound, he went beyond space until there was nothing but space, beyond time until days fell like raindrops into the sea.²⁶ Out in the open ocean, it was just him, his men—Uurwa, Uurwa was always there—and the color blue. During the day, the sun burned their dappled backs, and at night, the moon was a cosmic pearl. Glowing things rose from the black deep, mirrors of the stars they saw smeared through the waves.

The silver-bellied tuna did not rest, so neither did my father and his fellow hunters. They cut through the water caressed by currents that would throw a weaker merman off-course, chasing migrating schools across the open ocean, trailing nets woven from our village's brown kelp behind them. They did not return home until their nets were filled, did not stop swimming unless they fell to dreaming from sheer exhaustion. When one of them lagged and lapsed into sleep, the others drew an empty net closed around him and towed him until he awoke. Sometimes, if all were near exhaustion, they'd fail to notice one of their number floating near the surface, fringed red gills fluttering, hair and shell necklaces drifting up in the eddies as if they were already just flotsam. My father had lost a cousin that way. I used to try to picture what he

²⁶ Not many mer live in the open ocean, as far as we know (one exception are the Great Pacific Garbage Patch Mer, who themselves are displaced Polynesian and Micronesian populations), but there have been plenty of sightings of the Salishan Mer population heading out on hunts to intercept young bluefin tuna in the middle of their migration. Divers who try to record them get left in their wake, and the same is true for government attempts to regulate Salishan tuna hunts. It wasn't like what we had to go through with treaty rights and court cases and the Fish Wars, since the Salishan Mer can just dive out of sight whenever lubbers get too close, but our court cases did provide some good precedents for a non-profit advocating on their behalf. I wonder how Fshwiw would feel about that. I never got a chance to ask.

must have looked like, young and strong and so, so tired. I had to imagine it, because the few times I asked my father as a child, he shook his head and did not speak.

If a storm rolled in, they closed a net around themselves and endured. My father rose up in swells fifty, seventy-five, ninety feet high, and he stared out over the boiling gray water as if from the top of a cliff. Curiosity and terror electrified him. He'd trembled for hours afterwards, my strong father, and he admitted it to me even though I'd inherited my mother's "gift" for song, even though I could have used it to hurt him. Instead, I whisper-sang to him, *remember, remember, please remember*, and he gave me stories.

He had a weakness for melodies, my father. He stopped his work whenever whalesong whistled through the groves, and he could never resist my mother. When I found him after my mother's songs, my father looked like he'd fallen asleep in the open ocean and drifted down into the dark. I tried, sometimes to pull him up. His scars rippled under my fingers. He'd dragged schools of tuna back to the village with his men, trailing blood from fingers cut near to the bone by rope that sawed through seal-leather mitts over the course of weeks. He hadn't had to drag Mama back – she swam with him tail-beat to tail-beat all the way from the Caribbean, but now she wouldn't even tend his cut hands. I've tried to forgive him for learning not to speak as I grew older. It's easier to be silent, to let someone else sing.

Easier to flee where you think the voices cannot follow you, as I fled one night out through the ragged curtains, out into the open water, out where I curled into myself and tried and failed to breathe through the pain in my chest. The evening light cast dim patterns on the sand.

"Fshwiw?" A girl's voice, high and worried. I glanced over my shoulder. I couldn't make my face into the mask I needed.

Hsssh and two of her friends, carrying baskets of shellfish, their braids flowing in the current—dull red, golden brown, deep green—like their own drifting kelp grove. Her friends were already whispering together, eyes flicking towards me with suspicion. But Hsssh's dark eyes fixed on me. She swam closer, stretched out her hand. "Fshwiw, are you all right?"

"Yes," I croaked. "Please leave me alone."

One of the girls called for Hsssh, but Hsssh didn't respond. She was close enough now to see my twitching mouth, I knew she was.

"Are you sure?" She touched my upper arm, and I flinched. Everything I'd heard my parents say gathered inside me, pushed up into my throat. I swallowed. "Your father and mine are friends. If you need a friend—"

But her own friends—those narrowed eyes, that curled lip, that unwillingness to venture any closer. My mother's slim hands on my father's wrists as he tried to pull away, her voice in his ears, in my ears—

"If you need a friend, Fshwiw—"

"*Just leave me alone.*" A siren's voice rang from my lungs, slammed into Hsssh. Her face flickered, went slack, went fearful. Baskets of shellfish plummeted to the seafloor. All three of them bolted in a flicker of fins. I hung there alone in the gathering darkness with my hands wrapped over my mouth. I shivered. Below me, clams began digging themselves back into the sand. The echoes of my voice lingered in the tides. When I saw Hsssh after that, she turned her face away, so I saw only flashes of her fear, like glimpsing a crescent moon through the waves.

And only then did I realize how much she'd looked at me in the kelp groves, how often I'd glanced up while I was working to catch her dark eyes staring at me curiously, how many times I'd seen her smile at me and raise a hand to wave. While I had told myself a story of being

at the center of a whirlpool, Hsssh had been telling herself a story of orbiting at the very edges of that storm, of letting herself be drawn in.

And now I had hurt her, and for a long time, I believed I was the only one who would ever know that story, her story. I believed it for years, until I whispered a healing song into her cut palm and murmured an apology as well—it was cowardly, to say it without looking at her—and she laughed. “That was years ago.” Her fingertips traced my jaw, brushed my lips. I didn’t understand what it meant, but my gaze still flew to hers. I loosened my grasp around her wrist, but I still hoped she’d stay. She smiled down at me. “I think you’ve made up for it.” *[t/n: At this moment, I remember realizing it fully—oh, they were lovers. They loved each other. Then, of course, I felt the desire, energized by a spark of jealousy—did they still love each other? Was Hsssh the one that she needed, the way that I wanted to be?]*²⁷

Perhaps. But it didn’t change our history—in that moment, I was all the worst things the village thought of me. I was like my mother. A siren, a stranger. A witch. It would be better if we stopped polluting the stories of the village with our presence, if we vanished into the blue emptiness. Well, my mother did, eventually. And I suppose I have too, haven’t I? I just chose a different emptiness.

Here is a belief many in my father’s village still hold: A wave starts in the deep, birthed by the moon, and then it is born again and again. Your children will be caught in the current of your life. They may be carried to happiness, or to ruin, but there will be nothing new. The same story may be told a million times and we would never learn its lessons. So what was I, then? Motherthroat, fatherlung, motherskin, fathereye. What was I, if not the voice that picked up the melody?

²⁷ If I commented on everything that annoyed me about Jon, then this wouldn’t be Fshwiw’s story anymore. Sometimes, though, I read something that makes me just want to reach through the page and shake him and say *This is not about you*.

Interlude

May 2017

Yes, what was she? Who had I invited into the Artist's House? Not a monster—I could see that easily, practically at once (though later events would rattle me). I had grown up with monsters, after all, and had become skilled at identifying and avoiding them in adulthood. The “girlfriend” who only texted when she needed something, the professor who tried to force my artistic voice into the same key as hers through harsh critiques—I recognized them for what they were because of their familiarity, because I had already felt like a tool used by my mother, because I had already rejected my father's prescribed masculinity. Fshwiw was not like them.²⁸

Yet all the same, I felt sometimes as though she were a different sort of phantom. As though I had imagined her, like she was a kind of Philomena padding among the dark wooden walls, catching the light of the stained glass windows in the upstairs hall, her smooth brown skin suddenly gleaming deep blue, turquoise, green. I caught her once like that, looking at the colors playing over her hands, and when she caught me catching her, I saw a smear of red light across her cheek like lipstick.

It isn't as if I didn't imagine her, in a way, since I thought of her constantly while I worked in the attached studio, a chilly garage space. While I stalked around my piles of collected driftwood—here the little twigs in their boxes, here the bundled branches in the corner, here the trunks of wayward lumber leaning against the wall, all of them bone-white and soaking the room with the smell of the sea—I fantasized that she might glance through the windowed door and

²⁸ There are lots of little throwaway lines like this parenthetical sprinkled through Jon's sections, and I wonder sometimes about when he added them. I doubt it was there when he first wrote the interlude, since he's talking about “later events,” so it means that, after said events, he edited this work. When did he add this, and why? How much of what he did in those last few days was planned for days, maybe weeks, in advance?

watch me working, and I might look up and see her whirl out of sight, shy at having her gaze met. While I sat at the rickety drafting table, sketching every variation of spiral I could think of—hurricane, whirlpool, snailshell—I pictured her walking in circles, barefoot, in the soft dew-soaked moss outside, practicing her next song in sibilant murmurs. As I soaked driftwood pieces in an attempt to make them flexible again, I thought of her in front of the old vanity in her room, braiding and pinning her hair, her neck arched and her gills fine cuts against her brown skin.

And I imagined that she might grow cold, since she had only her shorts and t-shirt, and she might go hesitantly into my closet—not wanting to disturb me, not planning on borrowing anything long-term—and slip into one of my sweaters, the soft ivory one. I’m taller than her, so the sweater would fall almost to her pale knees, and her fingers would just barely poke from the sleeves. She’d inhale my scent from the collar—cologne and sawdust—and smile, and be warm. Maybe she would replace it soundlessly with the others, and I’d never know until I found a pink hair interwoven with the cables, or maybe I’d come back in and find her cross-legged at the foot of my bed, poring over an old sketchbook that she couldn’t resist flipping through...²⁹

I turned on power tools purely for the noise. I sanded long trunks of driftwood into curved forms reminiscent of Fshwiw’s gills and stood within her throat, and I told myself, over and over, please, for the love of God, calm down.

²⁹ I know what Fshwiw did during the day because I asked her and she told me. She did practice her songs. She had to. But also, once, she took every spice jar out of the cabinet and smelled them, and she spilled a spicy red one (chili powder? cayenne pepper?) all over the counter and the floor because she sneezed after smelling it. She cleaned the mess and put the nearly-empty jar in the way back of the cupboard. Once, she went through and opened every door in the house just to see what was behind them, including a trapdoor in the pantry. She said the cold, wet air underneath “breathed.” Pretty often, she went up in the attic and poked through the boxes left there, unearthing old photos, dresses, a few threadbare stuffed animals, and piles and piles of abandoned art supplies from previous residents. (I should tell whoever is reading this that the trapdoor and the photos and the stuffed animals are important, but that now isn’t the right time to talk about them.) Rarely, Fshwiw would take a book off the coffee table and squint at the letters, trying to make sense of how they’d turn into sounds. She never mentioned staring at Jon or thinking about him while she practiced. The sweater thing, though, that is true. She wore his sweaters because she was cold.

Of course, my wishful thinking was not omniscience, and one afternoon, I emerged from the studio into the kitchen to the utter silence of the house. The fire in the wood stove was a miniscule flame—the fire in the fireplace was only cinders—and the air had the same cold, still feeling that I'd felt when I'd first arrived at the Artist's House two and half months before.

“Fshwiw?” I called. I was hungry. “Fshwiw, do you want to make food?”

Only my own voice bounced back from the walls. I tossed more kindling and crumpled newspaper in the stove. Fshwiw hated tending the fires, though I'd shown her how to do so safely. “Fshwiw?”

Nobody visible out the kitchen window, nobody on the couch, nobody in my bedroom or hers. I even checked the attic, and although I saw her footprints sliding through the dust, she wasn't there. It felt like something heavy was hanging from my sternum, and I rushed out of the house—tried to rush past the feeling—as my breath turned to panting.

“Fshwiw!” I yelled into the pines. Little undergrowth, late sunlight moving freely through the needles onto the forest floor. Why leave? There was nothing on Waldron Island, nothing to look at, nothing to take interest in—a post office and a few isolated families—so where would she go? My feet carried me towards the sounds of waves. Where would she go, unless she'd returned to the Sound? I broke into a run.

My strides crashed through the trees—I stumbled, fell, hauled myself back to my feet again, the scent of snow two decades melted spiking in my nostrils for a moment—down to the rocky shoreline and the sand beyond. Low tide, but no pink-haired woman on the beach with mismatched legs. Only a tiny empty boat knocking gently against the creaking public dock, and a line of still-slightly unsteady footprints in the sand. Walking into the sea.

I had to sit down. I felt every grain of sand rasping my stinging palms, heard every wavelet against the shore, smelled the warm sap scent from every pine. The Sound rippled, deep green and gleaming in the afternoon light, and I thought I was an empty seabed. A drained backyard pool. I threw a handful of sand into the waves.

“What are you doing?”

Whispered in my ear. I startled, whirled. Fshwiw crouched behind me, her brown arms folded across her inked knees. She laughed. Her hair was soaked, several shades darker than usual, dripping seawater down her corkscrew curls onto equally drenched clothes. The tattooed octopus curled around her calf seemed to wave at me.

Hot anger burst up from my stomach. I swallowed, again and again. My fists ground into the sand. I said it anyway: “Where the hell have you been?”

Too loud, too harsh. Fshwiw lost her balance and barely caught herself as she toppled back. “Swimming. Just swimming.”

Fingers digging down through the grains, searching for cool, brackish water. Something for the anger, for the fire. Voice low, volume down. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were busy.” Her dark gaze avoided mine. “Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?”

She looked so small now. Is this what a man’s stature meant? Was I the size of my father? I reached out and embraced her, half-expecting to see his twisted red-haired knuckles instead of my own. I tried to soothe her stiffness in my arms with a sandy hand rubbed across her shoulder blades. “No, no, I’m not. I—you scared me. I didn’t know where you were.”

“Sorry,” she said into my neck. I felt her shiver against me.

“You’re cold. Let’s go home.” I helped her to her feet and pulled off my sweater for her to wear. She held the gray knit in her arms like a cat, hesitating.

“I can catch us dinner, if you want?” She said.

I stared down at her, at her whiplashed hopefulness. “What?”

“Here.” She pushed the sweater back into my hands and dashed past me, waving her arms to keep her balance in the small waves before diving forward and vanishing, leaving only seafoam ripples behind.

I waited. The wind off the sea was cold through my t-shirt, but I walked closer to the water’s edge, staring into the shallows. Minutes dragged on, the only sounds a distant ferry-horn and the wind through the trees mingling with the low slosh of the waves.

At last, a disturbance—little splashes, movement beneath the surface—and then—I jumped back, yelled—two silver fish leapt from the water and onto the sand, flailing and gasping. I stared at them—the iridescence hinting rainbow in their scales, quickly obscured under the sand, the blank look in their yellowish eyes, the gaping pink space of their gills. They flopped, dragged themselves further up the shore, a misinformed attempt at evolution. When I turned back to the water, Fshwiw had emerged, her hair sea-slicked back from her face, her thin chest still heaving with exertion under her soaked shirt. Foam swirled around her bare ankles.

Not Philomena. Artemis on the hunt. Aphrodite rising from the sea.³⁰ She nodded at the fish,

³⁰ In Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium*, he classified the (already vanishing) Mediterranean Mer civilization as “sharing traits both of man and of the fishes, though closer in form to man” and Linnaeus, after briefly classifying mer in the same order as dolphins and whales, likewise reconsidered after meeting with a family of kalamiehiä during his Lapland voyage in 1732. He still placed merfolk in a separate genus than humans (*Pisci*), but later editions of the *Systema naturae* referred to *five* varieties of man instead of four, distributed across four continents and the seas. A separate species, sure, but sharing the same basic societal structures and the same capacity for language, philosophy, art, etc. And of course, more recent studies of mer magic, mer DNA, and mer/landfolk families have challenged the idea that the mer are a separate species at all. As mer biologist Terada Ayano wrote in the conclusion of her book *Sapiens piscensis*: “We have always named without an entire picture, and then we paint a new picture from the name. Merfolk reveal the limits of our empiricism. They point to what we cannot yet see.”

What I’m saying is, after much research and deeply careful consideration of Jon’s words, I have concluded that Fshwiw is, in fact, a *person*.

now scarcely twitching on the ground. “See? Dinner.” She held out her hands. “Can I wear your sweater now, please?”

She carried one fish back, fingers hooked beneath the gills, sweater sleeve rolled up past her elbow, and I carried the other the same way. Its slender ligaments strained against the hanging weight. At one point, her hand sought mine, and I took it.

I thought how she must have looked underwater, her hair floating free at last, arms moving with practiced strength, her lips parted to allow the sea to flow through. I imagined her face distorted beneath the waves, rising to meet me, resolving into the woman I knew. And I thought that what I didn’t know about her was far more beautiful than what I could imagine.

And what did I know about her? The straightforward bitterness in her voice when she spoke of her family, the guarded tenderness when she spoke of Hssh. Her gaze while she washed dishes in the evenings, fixed at some point in the distance out the kitchen window, as though she could see past the trees and over the ocean beyond. Her grateful smile when I put a record on the old turntable, when big band music shook her from her reverie, when I touched her shoulder and drew her close into a dance, warm soap suds dripping down our wrists. Her shocked laughter when I dipped her low enough so her hair brushed the floor and her gills flicked open and shut.

What I didn’t know, and what I asked: “Did you ever dance with Hssh like this?”

A moment of silence from her, filled by exuberant saxophones and trumpets, drums keeping time. “Not like this, no.”

“But you did dance with her?” What I could imagine: Their fingers clutched together, their foreheads pressed together, their tails twined together. The seawater a translucent veil, only releasing the noise of their giggling.

Fshwiw twirled beneath my lifted arm, her movements uncertain. “Why do you want to know about her?”

“Well, she’s—” Her hand rested just over my heart, and I wondered how fast my pulse beat. What she thought of it. “She’s important to you. I want to know about the things that are important to you.”

“And why do you care about the things that are important for me?” I could hear the smile in her tone as I sent her spinning out, then back again. Steady in my arms as we swayed to a crooning solo, her back against my chest, her curls just a few inches beneath my chin. I breathed deeply. Seawater and lavender. The last notes of the record faded into rickety stillness, but I still held her, unmoving. I’d been quiet too long. She spoke again. “Is it just because of your works of art?”

Her voice vibrated into my lungs. I tried to tease, but I’d lost my breath. “Maybe. What do you think?”

Her back stiffened, and she pulled out of my grasp. “I think—I think the song is over.” She walked to the kitchen, throwing over her shoulder: “Don’t worry, Jon Kristensen. I’ll have your new story.”

I stood empty-handed in the center of the wooden floor. The needle ran its little circle in the center of the record, and I said, “Your story. Yours,” to a vacant room.

Chapter 3

Such Pearls in Our Throats

(2017; shaped driftwood, fishing line, and iron fittings)

Three driftwood trees, their remaining branches entangled, lean against each other. A luminous sphere hangs between them. Who created the rising moon? Who is to say it cannot be created again?

What does it mean, to sing of those that I know? What does it do to me—to them? I have let the stories roll over and over in my skull, ground down like glass. What was sharp and bright turns dull, opaque. Do I want to cut my finger on the past? Sometimes. Now, I have the feeling of my mother, my father, Hsssh, but I've half-lost their faces. When anyone speaks—when Hsssh speaks—she speaks with my voice.

This is what we lose. When the choir descends with the year's stories, netted in melodies, the voices of the unsingers float out, unknown and untouchable, while the choir's voices bind their subjects in a single song. Who am I to the choir, to the village? Witchling, stranger—if I am a part of their songs at all, that is who I will be. Who is Hsssh to the choir? A good village daughter, her green hair floating behind her in pearl-braided strands (meant to catch the eye of a future husband, to call them to her father Uurwa's home). And who is Hsssh to me? The girl who gasped air beside me atop the dark waves, her wet skin silvered in moonlight. The girl who sang to me, alone, in our grotto, until I understood that a kiss is also a kind of breath.³¹ The girl who unthreaded a pearl from her hair and pressed it into my palm.

³¹ Fshwiw uses *ulla* for breath here, not *hsi*, so it's like she's saying it's a breath-as-understanding, breath-as-revelation. Breath that is outside of ordinary being. Or breath-as-curse, but I don't think Fshwiw would say that.

But not yet. Not after my siren's voice had sent her darting away from me, driven through the dark seas as though by a nightmare. I expected her father in our home, cursing me, cursing my mother, cursing my father for bringing us here, though I was born and grown in the blue darkness. I lay curled in my little grotto and stared through the half-rotten kelp curtaining my entryway. The water greened with sunrise. When did Uurwa appear? Not when I found my father blinking and uncertain beside the remains of his dinner, tracing one finger along the edge of the wave-swept bowl. Not when my mother dressed my hair without any guilt in her fingertips, not when she rested before me and asked that I braid her hair in the same style as mine. Not when she kept me close in the groves as we pried urchins from kelp holdfasts, not when we sent clouds of glittering scales into the currents to prepare meals. Not months later, either, when the Upwelling wound its way once more through the village and my mother carried me—even when I grew larger, she always carried me—ahead of the whispers and away from the stories, out of my father's sight and out of my father's crumbling mind, into the cool open air once again.

Two years, and Uurwa did not appear. But I saw her, Hsssh, at the edges of my vision, shimmering. Round dark eyes in a round pale face, blurred through the water but unmistakable. Two years of turning to her, only to see her long green hair whip away through the kelp, her fins flashing green to gold as they caught the sunshine. Two years of growing apologies on my tongue and whispering them into the tides. They washed up on shore; they broke on the rocks; they swept out to sea. Jetsam, swirling, lost.

Two years of my mother's hand clutching mine—if she could have, she would have dragged me behind her in a net until my skin was marked with the ropes. She would have sung the sores from my skin every evening and thought that healed me—until I begged her enough and burst away from her enough that she allowed me to swim, alone, to do my daily chores. [*t/n*:

When Fshwiw told me this, I asked: “That was it? It was that easy?” And she said, “No, no, it wasn’t easy at all. We argued. Often. But they were boring arguments, not worth telling about.” I wondered then—was her mother already realizing that her favorite project was a lost cause? Was she already beginning to think about tossing her daughter aside, and the fights were just confirmation of her decision? I tried to follow the murky timeline of my own mother’s abandonment, when she had stopped kissing our cheeks or zipping our coats. But looking back, knowing what I know now, I wonder if Fshwiw and her mother’s discussions were only arguments, or if Fshwiw strengthened her position through siren magic.]³² She remained in her own dark grotto in our home, unwelcome and not wanting welcome in the village. At the time, I did not think of whether or not she remembered her mother in the sunken wreck. At the time, I rejoiced.

I drifted in the most overgrown parts of the kelp groves, taking my time to saw each large frond from the stalk and drape it over my arm. Even their heavy sliminess against my skin was a kind of blessing. I swam back fast, my arms outstretched, the fronds fluttering like ribbons, like wings. When an older merfolk frowned and jerked their chin towards the clusters of purple urchins trembling at the base of the huge weeds, I did not mutter under my breath as my mother did. I smiled. I spun through the water and set to work. I listened for them to say that I did well, that I was different than my mother, and since I put my mind in my ears instead of my fingers, I pricked my skin and drew blood many times. I learned to whisper against the wound, *reach*,

³² The only time Fshwiw mentioned these arguments to me was when I was telling her about my mother, and I said: “Sometimes I thought about running away to try to get her to notice me.” Fshwiw responded: “I tried that a few times, but I tried to get Mama to *stop* noticing me. As if I was trying to say that, ‘If you keep pulling me close, I will cross an ocean to get away from you.’” She picked at a mosquito bite on Sylvia’s legs, and I wanted to slap her hand away, but I didn’t. I asked, “Is that why you’re really here?” Fshwiw scrunched her face and shrugged.

In any case, at this point in her story, Fshwiw is about fourteen or fifteen years old. She hasn’t honed her siren abilities, and if Angelic couldn’t be influenced by her mother’s songs, what chance does a teenager have? Likewise, Fshwiw accidentally used her voice against Hssh, something that was very upsetting. Knowing what I know now, I think Jon is being paranoid. He’s wrong.

mend, smooth and soften, so my mother wouldn't catch my hands with an exclamation of distaste when I returned in the early twilight.

I even enjoyed diving into the skinningmen's cold grotto on the outskirts of the village, where thin, white-faced mermen scraped their knives across sealskins and hummed a low, looping chorus to turn predators away from the ever-present scent of blood. Gnarled crabs scuttled along the walls and pinched scraps of flesh from the currents with pale claws. I thanked the men for the winter pelts they piled in my arms even as the smell of recently-living fur crept into my nostrils, and when one of them flung a seagull's black-tipped wings at me—*here, for your witch mother*—my smile faltered only for a moment. The carcass was meant for my mother, I thought, not for me, though I could hear the wings beating in my ears, hear the gull's hoarse calls. I am not my mother, I thought. I have my father's black eyes. Outside, I let the wings drift away on the tide, an invisible bird twisting between the disembodied halves.

And when I returned home in the weeks of the waxing moon, as the leaning sun rippled gold through the top of the sea, I hesitated in a certain section of the groves, scarcely moving my fins, scarcely drawing in water over my gills. When the currents were right and the tide flowed out to the open ocean, they floated a gift into my path—the songs of the rehearsing choir, not yet imbued with the anchoring force that would secure them in the sea for generations.³³ Ethereal, but shimmering for a moment nonetheless, looping around my shoulders: *Six maids, locks pearl-laden, and the young hunters spiraling out and away—ah! The tragedy of empty stomachs, empty nets, empty waves—how they empty the heart as well.* Threading between my braids: *The orcas' songs close around the village—we venture out in cautious threes, eyes roaming, a melody of*

³³ When I asked Fshwiw how the songs stayed in the water, she shrugged and clicked her tongue. "It's dark there," she said. "So I don't know, but the feeling is like..." She held out one hand in a claw shape as though burying it in soil. "Like this, or the fingers that hold on for the kelp and keep them steady." Then she went quiet, weaving her fingers through the net that lay across her lap. "I don't know what they're called."

*forbiddance on our lips.*³⁴ And, at the beginning and end of every rehearsal, a few lines scattered through the groves, including: *Sing while the moon grows, gathering up our song; watch while the moon drops her light back into the waves, illuminating our stories.*

The singers' bodies glimmered in and out of sight between the streaming kelp fronds, a dozen women made half-phantoms in the clouded sea, a dozen women suspended in a hollow of smooth black rock. The stone—scrubbed clean and polished mirror-like across the centuries by those girls chosen to sing in the choir—resonated even when only the sea sang over it. I'd traced my hand over it on a night of the waning moon, rubbed away a scrap of algae, and felt the gentlest touch from the stone in return. The memory of a thousand hands, reaching up through the deep gray and ink-black bands to press palm to palm, thumb to thumb. Hsssh was among them. Hsssh was one of only three girls from this generation, her voice high and full and shivering at the end of each exhalation—but I did not go to the hollow to seek her out. I didn't. I went for the songs, for if I could not hear them at the Upwelling, I would listen to their ephemeral verses dispersing through the water.

Yet I was not unknowable, not merely a stray bright current. I touched the stone, and the stone touched me. I lay in the sea, and the sea lay in me. I turned my eyes to the sunshine, and the sunshine revealed me. Eventually, the women saw me through the weeds—pink hair and pink tail, foolish to think I could hide—and their voices rose in a round led by the gray-haired archwoman at the center. *The stranger's child lay listening—eel-like, in the weeds*—The first line sung alone, then taken up by all the others, so a prism of voices jabbed me like wicked gleams of light. I fled up among the canopy, darting—their voices pursued—I didn't understand the words

³⁴ Although there are no known wild orca attacks against humans, there have been several recorded instances of orca hunting Salish merfolk, including a (horrific) journal entry from fur trader Charles William Barkley in 1787 and, possibly, the case of a misidentified corpse that washed up at the Seattle docks in 1912. The newspapers exploded over the discovery of the partial remains, right up until the coroner found the gills and a marine biologist hypothesized about orca predation. Then, things got very quiet, apart from a brief note about the remains being taken away “for further study.”

any longer, only the tone, like the humming of the skinningmen driving away emptyheaded predators. I thought: *my teeth are long in my mouth, my shoulders are rough with scales, my hands are a gull's yellow claws, I am still, I am still my mother's child.* Though I didn't know exactly what they sang, it may as well have been those words. I understood my thought and my flight.

I understood, too, that Hsssh's voice did not join the others in the song, and that when I glanced back, I saw her, indistinct, already vanishing, face upturned towards me. I told neither my mother nor my father about the choir's song, my succinct banishment, Hsssh's silence. Yet I wished for someone to tell. I wished for a polished grotto and an unseen friend watching through the weeds. *[t/n: I felt like that friend, my eyes on Fshwiw's side-turned gaze, her nervous hands. I wanted to comfort her, to show I understood—that when I looked in the mirror and saw traces of my father in my nose and jawline and red stubble, I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes and reopen them to a new face. But would it frighten her, knowing I sometimes saw myself as an echo of a monster? It certainly frightened me. In the end, I let her stumble over her words, looking for the right translation, and I regretted every second.]*

I wished for these things, but I could be satisfied with scraps, with secrecy. That was what I thought, for I was my father's daughter as well as my mother's. I knew what my father did because I did nearly the same—we waited, both of us, until my mother slept deeply, and we fled, both of us, out the portals of our home, our paths never crossing. I saw him often, a deep shadow in the starlit winter and a blue shimmer in the luminescent summer, crossing low towards the densest part of the groves. In the early days, I clung to the ground, keeping as still as possible in

the ocean's breath. But my father had spent many years unnoticed, and he did not think to look around now. After several months, I swam close at his side, and at last he startled.

"Angelic, I—" His hands, hovering close to his ears, fell back to his sides. "Fshwiw?"

So I was that much like her. But he had to be relieved, didn't he? He had to be relieved that it was me instead of her. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"Nowhere important." He smoothed my hair behind my ears. His eyes were clear black, unmuddied by siren song. "But you should be going to bed. It's dangerous for you out here."

"I've been listening to the songs at the skinningmen's to keep away sharks and things," I said. My father's gaze flicked to the side. I swallowed. "I want to go with you."

"Young girls shouldn't sing the skinningmen's songs," he said, his eyes finally returning to mine. "You should listen to the choir's instead."

Bitter words rose to my lips—I had tried to listen to the choir—but my father took my hand and tugged me back towards our home. A hunter's grip is strong. I glanced over my shoulder as we went. A gleaming blue trail floated around Uurwa's house, already melting away in the tide. Someone had just passed through the water.

"You were meeting Uurwa?"

He seized up, the muscles of his back rigid. His hunter's tattoos—waves and swirling currents surrounding a school of fish—seemed as though they portrayed a storm instead of a successful hunt. "No. Yes. We—he lost a net."

"You're looking for it at night?" Something wavered in my memory. Figures as impermanent as seafoam in the dusk, and my mother's gritted teeth.

His hand pulled out of mine, and he faced me, looming over me. The blue summer glow shone strangely over his face, in his eyes. "Why do you need to know these things?"

His voice was slow, and so was mine. “I...don’t. I just—”

“No,” my father said, and then, more forceful. “No, you don’t. You don’t need to know them. Go home.”

I twisted my fingers together, holding my own hand. “I didn’t—I—”

“Go home to your mother, Fshwiw.” He grasped my shoulder and pushed me, just this side of gentle, towards my grotto. His next words scarcely crossed the space between us.

“Whatever home she wishes for you.”

[t/n: I reached out and took her hand, rubbing my thumb across her skin for comfort. Her eyes were very bright, her translation halting. “My dad kicked me out when I was eighteen,” I said.

Fshwiw looked down at her foot and mimed a kicking motion. “Oh,” she said, understanding the idiom. “Mine didn’t, though.”

“Right, but—” I dabbed a tissue below her eyes. “It hurts.”

She nodded. It didn’t matter what she’d done, who she was, who any of us were. Hurt was hurt—foundation, bedrock. We stopped translating for the night.]

Of course, I didn’t remain at home. I followed my father again that night, anger a hot stone in my throat—better sun-filled and sharp than sinking with grief—and it warmed me as I kept my distance from him, as I followed his glowing trail through the grove, as I heard voices at last. Murmuring, rising, a sob—a song.

Careful, quiet. I approached over the stones, hoping to be without light. I peered over the weedy ridge. Through the swaying kelp, I saw them—Uurwa and Shshr, my father. Uurwa with an arm around my father’s waist, Uurwa with a hand cradling the back of my father’s head. My father with his fierce thin arms thrown around Uurwa’s back, gathering fistfuls of sealskin vest.

My father with his face buried into Uurwa's neck. Their tails, deep green and blue, twining. Their hair tangling. And Uurwa's voice, singing in the deepest lows before arching up like whalesong, like the choir's love songs. My father shuddered, still crying. I sank back out of sight and stared off into the groves.³⁵

I could not hear the song's words, only a soft hum that felt like a promise. Uurwa sang a current for my father's ears alone, and soon, I left them there, settled back into my little nook of the home my grandfather dug. In the morning, I felt my father's hands draw a sealskin cover up around my curled body. I never followed him again.

Not long after I fled the choir and my father's secret alike, I noticed Hsssh at the harvesting places where crisp weeds sprang, bright green, from seams in the rock. The flashing tails and light laughter of her friends accompanied her. Low, scrubby weeds waved between us, and the sea tossed up sand, but I saw Hsssh's face turned towards mine, her dark eyes seeking mine. Distance, I thought, must have concealed her distaste. How she hated me, to look that often, to find me through the turbulent sea, I thought. But I looked back. Over and over, I looked.

It *could* have been a coincidence, our coming-together. Many nights, when the moon slivered herself into a smaller and smaller shard of light, I swam low through the portal—waiting until I was sure my father was long gone—and over the seafloor to the choir's hollow and swept it clean. My body hummed, attuned and in harmony, waiting for the currents that would carry my name to me. Yes, I waited. I waited, and behind me, a figure in the dark—seeing me dim and

³⁵ When she told me about this, she used such a casual tone that I didn't fully understand what she said. I think Fshwiw had been trying to avoid getting slammed with questions, which was exactly what happened once I processed her words. Had she ever told her father that she knew? Why not? What did she mean, "sort of?" After the last one, she finally snapped, "It's not polite to see it." Meaning, if you love someone besides your spouse, the courteous thing to do is hide it, and if you see someone having an affair, the courteous thing to do is to pretend you didn't. After all, the waters in the groves are already cloudy. Why stir them up more with all that gossip? Better to keep things calm and harmonious.

pink and glowing, my hair for once floating free in a million tendrils—a figure in the dark said, “Fshwiw?” Said my name like a spell, and I turned in the sea and out of my dream. Out of my fantasy. No one waited, no one with a face like a full moon, no one who needed an apology from me. *[t/n: At this point, it struck me just how much my initial encounter with Fshwiw was a coincidence—my house simply happened to be the closest to where she came ashore, and I simply happened to be there, needing someone like her even as she needed someone like me. I couldn’t help but wonder how Fshwiw saw the connection between us. Was it wish-fulfillment, our little touches and intimacies the first tentative blossoming of true romance? Or was it too unbelievable for her to be real? As we continued our translating work, I shifted across the couch until our shoulders touched. She let her head fall on my shoulder. When I glanced at her—close enough to be able to trace each translucent arch of her pink eyelashes—she said, “The air is heavy sometimes.”]*

I wanted meeting Hssh to be a coincidence, as if that would say something more about love than what actually happened, which is this: Weeks passed, and at the gathering place, we picked our way closer across the rocks until the currents from her tail washed over mine. I gathered slowly. I gathered more than I needed for the evening’s meal. I waited so that I could watch her urchin-scarred hand—seashell-pale wrist giving way to green spotted knuckles—search among the rippling leaves for ages at a time before selecting a bunch that was the same as all the others.

“Did you have a fight with your friends?” I asked at last. Our fingers were inches apart.

“No,” she said. “The weeds just taste sweeter here.”

We were so close that I could feel her turn her head to me, and I looked up into her large black eyes. “Haven’t you noticed?” She asked, almost smiling.

There was always some reason to find each other after that. First at the gathering place—where the bright weeds did taste sweeter if my hand lingered next to hers—and later at any other place in the groves where we could meet unseen and unheard. Rocky overhangs where we thrust driftwood into the murky caves to ensure no hissing pairs of gray skullfish³⁶ would emerge with their uneven jaws wide, shrieking and fleeing when they did with our fingers clutching each other’s wrists. Deep green nests in the kelp where we shared stolen roe, the gleaming orange eggs shivering with the movements of the embryo when we opened the scallop cases that held them. Grottos that we thought only we knew, though of course they were discovered again by each generation seeking refuge from unwanted eyes, where we cleared out slick algae and urchins, and we played at making a home. New unsung things joined my apologies—*why are you here, why do you want to be here, what do you think when you look at me, do you know our fathers love each other and how can that be so?*—but instead of speaking them, I only said little nothings, invulnerable pests like verbal sea urchins.

“Do you remember the song we heard at the Upwelling?” The calm, spiraling-in waters of my favorite grotto surrounded us. The incoming tide raced over our untouched heads, catching and swirling on the oysters that adorned the outer walls of the grotto. It snagged Hsssh’s green hair as I braided it, tugging it along like streaming kelp. I kept steady and gentle. I was giving her a crown. “The one right before my mother took me away?”

“The one about the pearls,” Hsssh said. She reached up to brush one of the purple sea stars clustered on the rock ceiling. It crept away at her touch. “I remember.”

“How did it end?”

³⁶ Wolf eels, I think. Strange that Jon opted to use Fshwiw’s name for it here rather than the English name, especially because it means that he might have known more literal translations for plants and animals than he let on. Or maybe he thought “skullfish” sounded cooler, I don’t know.

I heard her smile in the way her words danced in the waves. The water carried the scent of the world above, a taste like seafoam and gasping, drying weeds. “Ah, you have to hear the whole song if you want to hear the ending. Otherwise, what will you learn?”

“Then—” I pinned her braid with the long toe bone of a seal. “How can I do that? Mama takes me from the Upwelling.”

She snorted. “Convince her to take me along instead. I’m sure you two do something more interesting.”

At the surface, the ocean is devoid of light, a mirror spitting back at the sun. Only from below do you see the sunrays ribboning down. I did not say this to Hsssh, nor did I say anything about the nauseating buoyancy of lungs filled with air.

“Hey.” Hsssh touched my hand. “I’m not serious. I know your mother hates me.”

“I don’t think she knows you exist,” I said, and then covered my mouth. I’d spoken too fast. Hsssh laughed, a burbling, lifting current.

“Her mistake.” She drifted up, away from me, her braids swirling into the passing tide. “Because I know the song that you want, and I know how it ends.”

“And will you sing it to me?” I asked.

“It’s a waning moon,” Hsssh said, and I looked down. Of course. The wrong time to sing. I opened my mouth, another attempt at an apology, yet Hsssh continued to speak. “But I think it’s worth breaking the rules for your education.”

She took my hands, as she had when we were small and spinning together through the Upwelling, and drew me up before her. “Lovely in the dark places and lovely in the light—I have held such pearls in my throat when I speak to you.”

I heard the voices of the long-dead women echoing beneath Hsssh's high melody, and I joined my lower, quieter voice to their song. "But it's beautiful, to build a home beside one so like a sister. Beautiful, to string a necklace of things unsaid."

"If I give it as a gift, will I see you wear it?" Hsssh swirled slowly upward, still lifting me alongside her. Up through the portal in the grotto, up to where the inrushing tide carried us towards the shore. I held on to her. I let the tide take us in on its breath. "When you carry your children close, will you let them count the endless loops?"

Our hair gathered on the surface like kelp fronds. Should I act more afraid of the world above, I wondered? Should I pull away, dive into the blue shadows again? But the sunlight spangling her face dazzled me. I had seen no one's face this close, save for my mother and my father. A green mark over Hsssh's right eyebrow looked like a bird in flight, one wing split by a pale scar.

"We know the stories well," Hsssh sang. A change in tone, in melody, as though the tide of the song swept back into the deep. The way of songs, as I'd learned from listening to the choir—sweeping up to their midpoint, then back down to their end. A circle. A spiral. A tide. Hsssh could sing the change so well that the ocean in me shifted, following her call. "The sea in silence so loved the night. The sea so loved the night that the unsung grew cosmic between them—first a grain, then a fingertip, then more and greater—until the sea hung the moon upon the night's neck. The night saw the silver upon the waves, saw that love made love more lovely. Lovely in the dark places and lovely in the light—and I have held such pearls in my throat when I speak to you." *[t/n: Yes, that was what it felt like. Everything I had to say to her crowded my mouth—"I like the way you laugh." "Do you still love Hsssh?" "Could you ever love me the way you loved Hsssh?" "I feel like I could be a better person with you."—until I ended up saying*

nothing at all. I think that this is one of the reasons I write these translator notes, so that I can say the things I couldn't say before.]

The wash of the waves in the new silence. The distant crash of air mingling with water seethed through the shallows towards us, and I pulled Hsssh low to the seagrasses, back towards the grotto. “So?” Hsssh asked. She tore up a few grass blades, tickled my upper arms as I set out once more against the tide. “Did you hear what you wanted to hear?”

“I—” Such a short song, and part of it only a moon story, and Hsssh’s fingers intertwining with mine, and her hair intertwining with mine, and how soon would she wear pearls in her braids? How soon would she present those pearls in a strand to one of her suitors, entangling their remaining lifespans? “I don’t think I understand.”

A rough hiss of water as she snorted. “They’re in love, you fool.”

“Oh. Yes. Well, I know.” Did I know? Perhaps more than most, though not in the same way as Hsssh, and I could not comprehend it all at the time. Only now, stringing together the story, do I understand it, and what I could have said. In the moment, the grotto bloomed from the sand-strewn waves, and I swam inside, relieved.

“They love each other,” Hsssh said, an attempt at patience. She settled next to me against the wall. “And they can’t be together because they’re both women.”³⁷

³⁷ Though homosexual relationships and noncisgender identities are accepted in multiple mer populations, both traditionally (“startwinned” people in the Sea of Japan, trans folk in siren populations) and in more modern settings (the first legally-recognized gay marriage among Finnish *kalamiehiä* was in 2017), other societies are less tolerant. In Betty Wagner’s 1972 ethnography of a Micronesian diaspora community living off the coast of Tonga, she described how gendered labor divisions restricted women and queer merfolk; while men traveled outside the settlement to hunt game fish and trade with other communities, including those on land, women remained at home and therefore weren’t able to communicate with anyone outside their secluded atoll. Queer merfolk, as well as anyone else who hesitated following these roles, were shamed, ostracized, and even physically attacked for shirking their duties. In 1970, Wagner, herself a lesbian, witnessed a riot beneath her floating research station following the banishment of two young women who’d been having an affair. Her decision to shelter the group’s elders, the target of the riot, alienated her from many women and the queer community, and she left shortly afterwards.

The Salish Sea merfolk haven’t received the same anthropological attention (attempts to make contact throughout the 20th century were greeted with strong, dangerous song-currents), but they do still have gendered labor divisions that lend legitimacy to heterosexual pairings. Teamwork, two halves of a whole, etc. And, following their near-extinction in the 19th century, it seems like there’s a huge emphasis on having children. According to what Fshwiw heard from Hsssh (so, this is third-hand information, even though I believe her completely), there’s an entire subgenre of Upwelling ballad about young lovers swimming out to

I thought of my father embracing Uurwa, his forehead buried against the man's shoulder, his knuckles pearls against the man's back. Their tails twining and a gentle song humming through the groves—Uurwa, singing as the women of the choir sang.

Hsssh nudged my shoulder. "What are you thinking?"

I did not want to share any of this. But Hsssh looked at me, her black eyes wide, her gills unmoving. I had to turn the current of her attention. "In my mother's home, there are parents like that, though. Mothers in love and fathers in love. That's what she told me."

"Really?" She reached out, curled a piece of my hair around her finger. I tilted my head to follow her, but I couldn't look at her eyes, and I rushed out my next words.

"Do you want to do carvings?" I said, tracing my hand along the rough ceiling, between the mounded sea stars. "Little fish swimming here?"

"Carvings are a man's responsibility." Hsssh flicked her tail at me, setting the ends of my braids fluttering. "Are you a man, Fshwiw?"

I unwound my hair from her grasp, still looking at the rocks, the sea stars creeping over them. "No. It would just be nice." Deep, even carvings, done in my living memory. A little place made more by love.

She swept her own fingertips along the stone over our heads, pausing when she neared me. "It would be fine, this once. Does your father have tools?"

Yes, yes. I clasped her hands between mine. Her shell bracelets clinked against my wristbones. A flush of pink along her gills, across her cheeks. We withdrew from each other with

abandoned villages and imagining them full again. And, since having a child with a biological parent who is not a caretaker will "confuse the currents," there's not much room for queer relationships outside of secret affairs. It's a nasty snare, like an undercut rock; the water pounds against it for centuries, and once it sweeps you inside, it's really hard to get back out.

a slowness. As she left, the sun made her a flat silhouette. I lay awake that night and thought of pearls, thought of making a home next to one so like a sister.

When Hsssh's mother left their home two days later for her daily work, I approached with my father's black stone chisel and hammer clutched close. I called her name over the central portal, but hers was not the only face that appeared. The friends who had accompanied her when I loosed my siren voice scowled up at me, their deep red and gold hair wavering nets, their arms stretched out as though to shield Hsssh. Hsssh, half-in-shadow, her face turning away towards the interior of the home. "Hsssh?" Why did I say her name again? Because I thought hearing it from my lips would make a difference. I thought my voice would be an enchantment like my mother's, but tender, sweet, harmless. It wasn't.

"Get out," one of her friends hissed. "*Witch.*"

Hsssh did not look at me. I fled—not back to my home, where my mother waited, but into the groves. In my favorite grotto—the falling waters barely engulfing its highest point—I stared at the tools in my pale, uncallused palms. I stashed them there, in the mud, and I found new grottos only large enough for my own self to hide in. Maybe, I thought with my tail brushing the far wall of my new little nook, maybe if I had apologized at the start, Hsssh would not be so ashamed to be with me. If I had insisted on going to the Upwelling despite my mother. If I had used my voice for the stories of the village. If, if, if. If I could catch the tide in a net. Then I would be happy.

What moments are these—endless, silly little moments falling from my mind to my lips. What strangeness, these constant things flashing their scaled sides at the surface as though wounded.

But what am I, then, what am I? A school of silver nothings—one glitters into being, and all the rest follow, turning together. Into the shadow. Into the light.

I was desperate, you see. Listening to the choir, out of sight, dreaming with my eyes open among the trailing kelp: What song would I sing into the rift? What stories would I want to tell and have told? A foolish idea, since the only stories that I had worth telling were the ones that would ensure no one would speak to me again. Air in the lungs and shame in the heart. Then, with Hsssh, I chattered about nothing as I braided her hair, my gills flicking open-shut-open-shut, my fingers darting and then hesitating—I didn't want to finish too quickly. If I did, she might ask me something, as she did once: "How do you use your siren voice?" She said into the silence. The question a quick turn of the tongue away from *why* do you use your siren voice. I told her I didn't know, and I knew by her silence that she thought I was lying. An unspoken accusation and an overdue apology went unsung into the current.

So if I wound my chatter into nothing, I nibbled at her with questions instead. *[t/n: I felt a flush of recognition at these words. How often, while we cooked meals together over the wood stove, did I think the chattering bacon in the pan wasn't enough? How often had I tendered nervous questions to avoid the ones I really wanted to ask, only to have her hesitate? Everything was eggshells, it seemed, but then one question would get her talking, and I was relieved.]* Did she like her sisters or her brother more? Why? What was it like to have younger sisters and a baby brother? Did her mother comb their hair in the mornings? Did her mother have a box of precious things? How precious? Did her parents fight? (Unspoken in this: Did her mother know about our fathers? Did she know?) Did her parents fight often? Where did Hsssh go to hide?

“Hide?” She wrinkled her nose when I asked this. “Why would I need to hide from them?” When I shrugged, she stopped my hands with hers. “Fshwiw, are you scared of your parents?”

“Everyone is a little scared of their parents,” I said.

“Fshwiw—” I could hear the question rising up, a dreadful wave. “What happened to you that evening? When you used your voice on us?”

My father’s faltering voice and empty eyes. My mother’s song shaking through the floors, the walls, like our home was her body and we had been devoured. I opened my mouth. I said, “Nothing.”

My desperation persisted across the years, a songlike current beneath my spoken words. Stories about my mother’s life (A good thing my mother did for me—where I didn’t have my words, I had hers) burbled out of me to Hsssh, as did little songs about futures that hadn’t come, about lives we wouldn’t lead. And of course, with Sylvia, I was reckless with myself. I wanted so badly to be gone from the village, to belong somewhere else, and this is a strange, impersonal kind of belonging, isn’t it? I share her legs, her tattooed stories.³⁸ She shares my tail and its memory of the water.

I tell you this because I want you to understand how it feels to have a story someone wants to hear. What it means to me. The village is made whole by its history, the songs that lift from the depths, and I suppose a person is just a small village. A body is just a small sea.

³⁸ Sylvia had several stories for each tattoo. They contradicted each other. They couldn’t all be true. One night, soon after we met, I told her this. I was drunk and accusatory, and I wanted to kiss her. “You’re lying,” I said. “These can’t all be true.” She smiled, two grins over her pink margarita appearing in my wavering vision. “Maybe,” she said.

I did get my wish for a coincidence, after all. Late one night while the waning moon slipped towards the horizon, I hunched over the black stone of the choir's hollow, scrubbing loose the persistent algae and sponges that roosted there. Why? Only because I was not given to much mischief—tangling nets among the kelp or adorning the portals of my enemies with sea urchins did not appeal—and I did not want to sleep. Still, the weight of the hours bent my shoulders. My fin dragged over the ground.

“Fshwiw,” Hsssh called. For once, I had not been waiting for my name, and I surged back from the stone. Her eyes shone in the darkness, marking her place above the hollow.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she said.

I turned back to the stone. “And I’ve been hiding from you.”

She caught my hand as I crumbled a bit of sponge beneath my fingers and swept it from the stone. “Why?”

“Because—” *Because you turned away when I wanted you to defend me, but I don’t think I have any right to be upset with you. Because I never explained, never apologized. Because I still haven’t found the best words to say how sorry I am. Because I know that it’s been years since I hurt you, and the hurt is still there in the water. My siren call is still there, dispersed.* But these answers were too small within me to even call pearls. I only know all of them now, and only in knowing them can I wish that I’d found a way to tell Hsssh.

The first snap of a net’s strand is a warning and a weakening, one of the few trustworthy ways to know the future—once a single line goes, the rest will fall apart in their time, unless you undertake the knowledge of what’s broken and the task of repair. I once overheard Uurwa telling this to his children: *The danger is not in a net breaking, for this is what nets do. The danger is in what you choose to do afterwards.* Our natures are not so simple as a net’s. We choose.

“Because,” I said, “I don’t want you to treat me like some embarrassing secret.”

Her disbelieving laugh hissed through the water. “What?”

“You didn’t even look at me in front of your friends.” *I’m hurt. Help me.* “You said nothing when they called me a witch. Do they even know that we—that we’re—”

Hssh joined me down in the hollow, her nose scarcely apart from mine, her gaze bright with reflected light. “No. No they do not.” Her voice reverberated from all sides, as though I faced the choir again. “And what am I meant to tell them, Fshwiw? That I choose to be alone for hours at a time with the girl who eavesdropped on the choir’s hollow? Who disappears at the Upwelling each year with her mad mother?”

She shoved my chest with one hand. “You turned us dumb and scared as minnows with a few words. You’ve said *nothing* about it since then. What can I tell them? That I know you better?” Hssh laughed again. “Do I, Fshwiw?”

“Yes.” I stared past her, at a dark point of nothing on the rocks. Regret pooled in my stomach. What apology could I give that would mean anything now? It would be like sending salmon bones to swim upstream. My voice twisted out of me, growing louder as I spoke. “Yes, you do—and I know you better as well, because you chose to go with me to those grottos, you chose to hide away with me. You chose not to sing when the choir drove me off.”

Hssh turned my face to hers. Her fingers were warm on my cheek. “Do you know why I chose those things, Fshwiw?”

Silver-lit ripples from the waves far above crossed her face, shifting her expression—a frown, a trembling lip, a smirk—but the wideness of her eyes did not change. My lips parted.

“Say it,” Hssh said. “Please, Fshwiw. Say it.” The hollow whispered her words back to me. *Say it say it say it say it.*

A pearl in my throat. Lovely in the dark places and lovely in the light. Give it as a gift and perhaps she would wear it. Perhaps.

I shook my head. Hsssh's hand fell from my face, the water newly cold on my skin. She drifted off to her usual space in the choir, alone in the night sea. I felt something would leap from the darkness at her. I followed her to that place.

"I always choose this spot," she said. She pointed up. "Look."

Through a gap in the kelp above us, stars shimmered clear and bright, the suspended scales of an impossible fish. I inhaled as though taking in air. It was a *s'hsi-wir*, opening a glimpse to the lucid world above. A sliver of the nearly full moon shone down at its edges.

"I get in trouble if I look up too often during our rehearsals, so sometimes I come here at night," Hsssh said, staring up at the stars. Some were larger and brighter than others, I noticed. Shining white or blue-tinted or so faint that they were shadowed purple. "I've seen the moon in all its forms, and the stars, of course. Plenty of clouds during the day. And birds. I've seen birds, flying."

Now she looked at me. "I think that maybe there are singers who are no longer here, and they watched it as well, and they thought it was beautiful. I think that maybe I could tell them about what I've seen, but that I don't know who I can tell now. Because they won't understand. So I keep it a secret."

"But I want to be understood."

Hsssh let out a small laugh that wavered in the sea around us. "People have to know you to understand you, Fshwiw."

Ulla. A knowledge that cannot be shared, cannot be understood. *Ulla.* A breath that once taken cannot be given back. I closed my eyes, just as I had ten years ago when my mother first broke the ocean's surface. "I've breathed air."

Silence. I spoke again. "My mother takes me to the surface during the Upwelling. That's why you don't see me."

At last, I looked at Hssh. She stared back at me, and I wished to curl away into myself until nothing remained. I only watched the stone beneath me. Hssh's mottled hand reached out, tentative, and took mine.

"Will you show me?" She asked.

[t/n: Ah, I thought at the time. Maybe this is the key. Maybe this is what she wants, an exchange of secrets, an opportunity for transparency. Maybe this intimacy is greater than her head resting on my shoulder, or a dance to an old record, or even the kisses that we hadn't yet shared.]

The songs of the Upwelling are meant to remember and therefore to teach, to fold lessons into waiting, empty hands. This is how you hunt while also being hunted. This is how you harvest without being dashed against the rocks. This how you love your husband when your heart is bubbling with worry, this is how you hold your wife when the waves crash down on you both, this is how you raise your children to eat their fear. But not all stories are told, so we can still find ourselves without guidance in unfamiliar currents, the blue of the open ocean as indecipherable as a closed eye.

Here is one lesson of my story, though the choir would never sing it: break a rule you hold dear—a lie to a loved one, a promise to yourself, a bone of your being—and it can never

rupture the same way again. Choose wisely, plan carefully. Make a spectacle of your disgrace. Make it delicious—but get away with it.

I went to Hsssh on the night of the full moon, when her throat scratched from evening upon evening of rehearsing the year's songs. For weeks, summer had soaked into the waves, drenching us in green sunlight, sending fat spotted seals whirling after fish among the warm canopy fronds. Soon, Hsssh would descend with the choir—her first descent—into the darkness and bone-coldness of the rift. But first, she wished to travel to the shore. She wished to breathe air in cool, night-scented gasps, and I would take her.

So long as she still wanted to go. As I waited outside the little grotto that she shared with her sisters, conscious of the phosphorescence³⁹ pooling around me with every twitch of my fins, her change-of-mind seemed inevitable. A shuffle from inside—I crouched, leaving a trail of ethereal blue—a sleepy murmur, a hissed, “Go back to sleep”—I sealed my mouth, gills fluttering old water—and Hsssh's pale face rose in the portal. She grinned and shimmied out. The glowing water shivered around her. It vibrated down my throat, into my lungs.

“You're sure you want to do this?” Even my whisper trembled, a thin and fragile ribbon in the waves.

“Yes. Little clam.” Hsssh seized my hands, and I watched the moonlight silver her scars against my skin, smooth and dark as the night sea itself. “I'm just glad you told me.”

Her trust said that because I'd told her one secret, I had told her everything. As though a wave only crests once. That very evening, that very moment, I caught a gleam of blue in the corner of my eye; I glanced over Hsssh's shoulder and saw my father like a phantom in a nimbus

³⁹ In *hsifsh*, this seasonal light made by algae is called *n'sshu*, which literally translates to “star breath” or “star song.” I wish we had a better word than “phosphorescence” for this.

of glowing blue. He drifted, hair wild. His eyes to mine. He had passed his secret to my memories, and now mine passed to his.

To flee from sight in the waters of summer, you must only let them settle around you, and so my father enshadowed himself. Perhaps he would tell Uurwa soon, when they found a lonely enough spot in the groves. But Uurwa would only watch his daughter and wonder. Uurwa would not—could not—confront Hsssh. And Hsssh hadn't seen, didn't know what I hadn't told her. When my eyes slid back to her, she was saying: "There's no one else I'd rather do this with."

"You would do this with someone? Not alone?" And risk a witness, a rumor? My father slipped from my mind, an easy thing to do. I wished to put him away as neatly as my mother's box.

Hsssh pulled me to the higher waters, where the tide would carry us more easily to shore. "Most people do. S'swh went with her sister—it was a mistake that she told me."

"But the songstories—"

"Are the loudest way to tell the truth, Fshwiw."

So this was another thing unsung, a whisper floating on the undersides of waves, hiding just beneath kelp leaves: Young merfolk spiraling up to the crystalline waves with their friends, daring to break the surface to see the pure, focused stars. They cough and choke and feel as though they're dying, and they realize, horrified, that maybe all the songs were right, that the air petrifies your lungs into black stones. Some of them dive back into the only world that will have them, never expelling the tiny seas rocking inside themselves.

Or, if they do succeed with drawing in real air, if they stay when everyone else has gone and they breathe with the wind on your bare shoulders, they think there's something missing in themselves afterwards, something uneasy in the sideways looks of their friends. They all suppose

they were the only ones to do something like this. They never speak of it again, and the memories sigh into nonbeing like seafoam, left only in the warnings that are our legacy: Do not breathe the same air the lubbers breathe (though I survived). Do not go above (though sometimes I think the light in your eyes is only a pale awe next to the stars I once glimpsed).⁴⁰

What happens once keeps happening. Even unsung songs swirl back through their cycles.

I intertwined my fingers with Hsssh's, a heat beneath my gills. What kind of misbehavior was this, and what kind of glamor had I given myself—thinking that I was some sort of gift-giver of forbidden trinkets, feathers and green glass and gasps of starry air? Foolish and foolish. Silly little clam. Years later, I confessed this to Hsssh while she traced the new scars marking my fingers like rings. She laughed and kissed each knuckle. “It was always special. It was with you.” And I felt that I grew. But back then, on that night, I couldn't see past my loose hair clouded around my face, pink gone to gray in moonlight.

After so many years, the currents leading to my mother's inlet were familiar against my shoulders and my fins. The faint taste of mud and sweetwater eddied at the top of my throat, growing stronger as we approached. At last, waves lapped just a tail-length over our heads, rolling by so close that each moonlit vein glowed, and their crashing against the rocks—a susurrantion and a sigh—seemed like an overhead conversation. Hsssh stared off into the dark,

⁴⁰ It's unclear how many mer populations have a taboo on breathing air, because obviously the ones landfolk have talked to the most don't share this taboo. Sirens have kept close ties, both friendly and not, with landfolk for centuries; in the South Pacific, Micronesian mer (*kanaka kai*, *kakai'o e tahi*, or *ivi ngaru*, depending on the region) traded, traveled, and fought with their wayfaring neighbors. Their lives are well known.

But as for those who aren't...there are definitely uncontacted freshwater and brackish mer in the Amazon River, but they might only hide underwater when lubbers come around and bother them rather than living underwater completely. We've seen this kind of withdrawal before with the Mediterranean mer, who retreated to harsher and harsher settlements (and relied more and more on piracy for survival) during the rise of the Roman Empire. And, of course, there was the discovery of the “Northern Atlantis” ruins off Iceland's south coast in 1995, whose architecture and crafts are closely related to Mediterranean mer artifacts. Meaning that a splinter population escaped through the Strait of Gibraltar and lived undetected in their new home for centuries. Did they breathe air? Are their descendants still alive somewhere? Who knows.

towards the shore. Between the deep blue shadows, the light ribboning over her face revealed wide eyes, a trembling mouth.

“Will it hurt?” She asked, so faint that the tide nearly pulled her words to pieces before they reached me.

“It won’t—it won’t be comfortable.” A few days before, I had told her about pouring the water from her lungs, and she’d clutched a hand to her mouth. “But I can help, if you want me to.” Of this, I still wasn’t sure—the horror in her dark eyes had only intensified when I told her the role my mother’s song had played in my first breaths.

Now, though, she breathed deep, her pink-edged gills flaring wide. She took both of my hands in hers, holding them tight. As her green hair pooled around her shoulders, she set her jaw and nodded. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“I trust you.”

Was that what lifted me towards the surface? Her words resting in my curls? Her words inhaled, floating past my gills and buoying me as though I were already breathing air? What shape is the word trust, and what currents does it create? We looped hands and arms together between us, washed our fins through the cool darkness of the sea, and we rose. I set my gaze to Hsssh’s light-haunted face, and we rose. Her dark eyes turned to the silver shine so near above us, and we rose—we rose—we rose to where the sea had gifted the moon.

Just before we passed into the air, Hsssh closed her eyes, and I—in between the air and the sea, the open world crowning my hair with wind—felt fear bubble in me again. I thought Hsssh, behind her pale purple eyelids, was turning away from the change even as it occurred. But of course, I know differently now: it was never change that frightened Hsssh. Even as the

cradling sea burst away from her into salt spray, even as the last mouthfuls of her home spilled over from her gills and threatened to strangle her, even as I called forth the water within her while I still coughed and choked on my own little ocean and she retched with one hand over her mouth—even then, she did not fear change in the way I had expected.

She breathed. It had rained earlier that evening—drops rippling out across the waves and making the gray light beneath dance—and the air was fragrant with damp moss and rain-washed stone. She smiled. We breathed, drawing in together what was forbidden and sweet. *Ulla*, once again, together this time.

Her hair, alive in the water, hung close and dripping and dark as octopus ink around her wide cheekbones. She still gasped at the air, and her hands still clutched mine, but she spoke: “It’s not—like anything—like anything else.” It was the language of a shared secret: This isn’t like anything else. This can’t be explained. *[t/n: “You had to be there,” I said, and Fshwiw nodded, her face grave. “Yes,” she said. “Exactly.” I listened for a moment to the fire’s crackling. It was late May now, and we could go without it, but I had caught Fshwiw staring at the flames more than once, her lips slightly parted, her body falling back into the pattern of gills as the sparks mesmerized her. “Do you think you could explain this to them?” I gestured at the house. The green braided rug, the antlers over the fireplace, the spiderweb frail as rotten thread in the high corner. I wanted her to say that only we’d understand it. Instead, Fshwiw laughed. “They aren’t interested in my explanations, Jon.”*

I tightened my jaw against everything else I wanted to say. Whatever I came up with, it would be wrong. That should have been obvious to me. I stared into the guttering fire, wanting to extinguish any chance of seeing Fshwiw—amused, condescending—in the semi-darkness. For that reason, I didn’t see her reach for my hand, only felt the brush of her fingertips over my skin.

“This story isn’t for them.” When I looked at her, I saw only the faintest gleam of her eyes. I heard my own heartbeat.]⁴¹

And now, after years of dreading the buoyancy of air that I’d long breathed out—in the deepest parts of the groves, in my dead-of-night grotto—I was not alone with this secret.

The breakers, though loud beneath the surface, seemed lazy and harmless above water. They hissed and foamed over the weed-covered rocks, but no great whales of white spray breached against the shore. As I guided Hsssh towards the stones, she whirled around, staring at the world above. How unearthly it must have looked to her. Everything drained to black and silver under the moon, the trees a shadowy absence in the distance. The sky somehow more touchable in its starlight than the slipping-away sea against our tails, than the damp jelly-flesh of the weeds beneath our hands, than anything else as we pulled ourselves from the sea and onto the very beginnings of the shore. Breathing hard, gills fluttering as habit, we gazed at the stars flowing in their seafoam river across the sky and vanishing in the round brightness of the moon.

Or at least, I did. I suppose I still had some of my childish nature. I still wished to watch simple beauty and feel myself come apart in the waves, in the air. To turn and look at Hsssh—to find her looking at me, as she was then, without any gloaming shyness—I suddenly had a body again. Remnants of my siren voice still shivered on my tongue, in the back of my throat. Seaweed pressed against my scales, saltwater ran rivulets down my spine. I breathed in time with the waves. At some point, Hsssh had released my hands. She leaned back on her elbows now, grinning. “It’s wonderful here.”

“It’s different,” I said. Though the birds my mother sang from the sky had been beautiful, though I would devour the scent of earth without salt if I could, I could not let the word

⁴¹ Maybe it was even for her. Imagine that.

“wonderful” out into the air. In my father’s language—Hsssh’s language—it emerged as a harsh rasp. But perhaps, in reflecting on it, this was the appropriate sound. Something that meant loveliness, but which embittered the ear and the tongue. I had never chosen to take the air. The choice had been made for me.

“You don’t like it?” Hsssh’s words fizzed and popped. I thought I heard my mother’s scolding voice in my ear: *you speak as I do here*.

I lifted one shoulder, let it drop. “It’s not important.”

Hsssh studied me. “If you want to go back—”

“No, no. I just—” I felt as though my lungs were filling again. *Snk, snk*. Gills open, closed. I crossed my arms across my chest.

Her fingers gently pried my hands free, laid them against her gills. *I trust you*. She, too, breathed in time with the sea, so even outside of its embrace, this push and pull linked us. Our exhalations mingled and disappeared together into the warm night air, and Hsssh lay finger and thumb against my gills, pressing them closed. *Do you trust me?* I nodded, and she smiled. The air within me eased. Had it always felt, with my mother, like I had been swallowing stones? Now I thought I could swim through the air and into the forest beyond. I could carry Hsssh with me through the spice-scent pine branches until the amber dawn warmed us and the only memory of the sea was our shared breath.

Her thumb smoothed my eyebrow. “I’ve never seen your eyelashes like this.” The air had transformed what was soft and indistinct into the sharpness of lubber fishhooks. But Hsssh did not draw away as she spoke, did not seek distance. “You’re all silver,” she said.

Her own lashes gleamed as her eyes flicked over my face and shoulders. In daytime, would they be amber at their edges? When early rays struck them, would her eyes reveal

themselves as the rich brown of the earth that lay within sight but still just out of our reach? The freckles scattered over her face were delicate as the patterning of seabird wings. A faint spot touched the curve of her upper lip, a strand of her hair fallen over it. I let myself brush it to one side, let her breath wash over my fingertips as it couldn't below the water, and I wanted. I wanted to see her in the soft light of morning. I wanted to see her bold under the noon sun. I wanted the sunset's colors only against her upturned face.

I wanted her.

I moved first, my hand to her cheek, and she rose to me. In the darkness of our closed eyes, our foreheads touched, noses nudged together. Still uncertain. But beneath the sound of the waves, beneath our breath, a first brush—silent and summer-soft, *ulla*—her lips against mine. I tasted a gentler salt than the sea's on my tongue as we pressed closer, as she hummed against me. The shape of her words trembled through my throat—*yes, finally, yes*. I drew her up in my arms—

The crackle of needles and dead, dry branches. The sudden realization that something—several somethings—watched us. We jerked upright, grabbed each other, ready to leap back into the shallows—but no lubbers raised their weapons or bared their teeth. Only two animals, gray as rainclouds in the moonlight, stood at the edge of the trees on long, slender legs, their snouts raised high in our direction.

“Wait.” I held Hssh, pointed until her eyes turned away from the horizon and towards the creatures. We stared at each other. Our eyes looked so similar, so dark. Their leaf-shaped ears flicked and their nostrils flared. Little snorts and quick gasps of breath reached us.

I watched Hssh watching them, the tension in her face melting into a smile. She stretched out a hand, called to them. At once, they fled deeper into the forest, bounding and

vanishing in the deep shadows. So light, as though the air were water. We waited until the last noises of their passage faded.

Hsssh laughed, leaned against me. “They’re beautiful. What are they?”

“I don’t know,” I said. Everything in me seemed like a song. “But we could find out together?”

[t/n: Be patient, I told myself. Be patient.]

“Yes.” Hsssh kissed me again. “Yes, yes, yes.”

We returned many times, and I grew to know her body better in silver air and darkness than I knew it in the green sea. Each time we breathed air, I thought of the blue light ringing my father and Uurwa, of my mother’s language storm-ravaging our home and sailing over the waves. My apology to Hsssh lying dead between us.

I told myself I had reasons not to speak. Soon after that first night, Hsssh stopped me in the groves, her friends at her side. My vest, she told me, was falling apart—she had plenty of ornaments to adorn a new one, more than she knew what to do with. Tiny purple shell-coins, ghostly white snail shells, mother-of-pearl carved into tiny silvery fish. “Come over and sew with me,” she said. “I need help with my little sisters. They’ll stay still and work if they see you doing it.” Her friends stared, and I accepted.

“Yes.” A simple thing to say, and yet, already growing within me, the knowledge of our fathers, my mother, my harm. Such pearls in my throat when I spoke to her, unsinging and untrusting and fearful.

Interlude

June 2017

Spring leafed into summer, and I stopped trying to hear singers in the distant waves, choosing instead to trust Fshwiw's account and submerge myself in my work. Still, I wondered on our walks along the shoreline—was that hissing only seafoam transforming back into air, or was it a song I couldn't yet understand?

"It was just waves," Fshwiw told me as we worked in the studio. "The songs don't come this close to land, remember?"

She leaned forward on the stepladder, a smile teasing across her face. "Or have you not been listening to me?"

The sculpture that she'd been holding steady—*Where the Moon Calls*, nearly finished but still precarious—shifted over my head. "Careful, careful," I said, and Fshwiw glanced away, guilty. With the sculpture still once more, I twisted my pliers, winding and tightening a length of wire around the silk-textured driftwood. "I promise I've been listening."

"Hmm."

"I have!" But when I looked at her again, her gaze didn't meet mine. In the new summer sunshine, the garage-turned-studio was airless with heat. I'd shed my t-shirt hours ago and continued to sweat—and now, Fshwiw's dark eyes traced the unbroken line of my neck down to my shoulder. Freckles to sunburn, a novelty for her. I resisted the urge to pose outright—it could make her laugh, or it could make me look like a vain idiot—instead contenting myself with a subtle bicep flex.

If I had asked her then what she was looking at, playful, light, I think she would have frozen. Staring at the floor, her gills opening and closing. Flustered, she would have murmured something that could be mistaken for the truth. And since I didn't ask her, in that moment, what she looked at, I can only wonder if perhaps I had already ascertained the ways I could expect her to lie, the ways that those she loved had to surprise the truth out of her.⁴²

I planned to surprise her. "Since I am such a good listener," I said, "I've already finished the sketches for the third piece. Do you want to look at them with me? Maybe after dinner?"

With the final wire secured, I stood and held out my hand to help her descend the ladder. She clutched my fingers, wobbling a bit as she came down the steps, holding her breath. I refused to rush her answer. When both of her pale feet—she'd abandoned shoes as soon as it was warm enough to do so—rested on solid ground, she smiled up at me. "Yes. Yes, I'd like that."

She'd gathered her pink braids off her slender neck, and her dark face shone in the sunlight filtering through the studio's windows. Sweat gathered, salt and soft, over her full upper lip. Looking at her, I felt words rise and catch in my throat, battling my breath.

I was calling the third sculpture *Such Pearls in Our Throats* not just for what she and Hssh had shared, but also for that feeling, those words that gathered in me. I had to speak soon, I knew, or I would choke.

The plan was for a delicious dinner, something that I cooked entirely for the two of us. Of course, no plan survives contact with the enemy. Prior to that evening, I wouldn't have said that I

⁴² Surprising the truth out of someone. I tried confronting Sylvia like this the first time she ever disappeared over the weekend. Sat waiting for her at the kitchen table with the note that she'd left out in front of me ("Back Sunday night" signed with an S inside a heart), and as soon as she came in, I asked, "What the hell, Sylvia?" She turned on her heel, let the screen door slam behind her, and I didn't see her until Thursday. Sylvia disappearing like that was bad, but me thinking that I could only communicate with someone by ambushing them wasn't great either.

had any enemies (besides time and money and all the usual things), but then *she* rang the doorbell.

In late afternoon, the sounds that drifted through the woods—birds, boats, an occasional oceanic sigh—had a slow, sleepy quality to them, like they'd been hung in the evening's first amber light. Even the fish in the pan seemed lazy, pops of grease subsiding to muttering quiet again. So when heavy footfalls slammed up onto the front porch, I jerked out of my daydream—a perfect speech delivered over chocolate ice cream and beneath a star-strewn sky, the perfect story to show Fshwiw how I felt about her—and when the doorbell shrilled through the house, I groaned. Tossed the tea towel I kept over one shoulder onto the counter, headed for the door as slowly as possible without being outright rude. In the hallway, Fshwiw touched my arm, her eyes wide. I laid my hand over hers. “I’ve got it. Don’t worry.”

I eyed the dark wood and its stained glass vignette. Maybe they would go away before I even opened the door. Hardly anyone lived on Waldron anyway—most likely it was a couple of kids ding-dong-ditching. A retiree looking for a lost dog.

Not so. The doorbell rang out again, followed by the sound of a fist against wood, less a knock than a slam. “I’m coming,” I called. “Christ.”

Behind me, I heard Fshwiw’s careful footfalls as she retreated from sight. I gave her a moment before I pulled the door open.

“Can I help you?” I asked, my tone a few degrees south of helpful. On the porch, a slight young woman⁴³ glared up at me, her fist raised and ready to begin bashing the door again. Her narrowed eyes flicked over me, and her short black hair seemed to bristle up from her scalp.⁴⁴

“Yeah, you can,” she said. She shoved her hand into a dirty backpack she carried at her side and waved a piece of paper in front of me. I couldn’t help noticing that a strong smell of fish wafted out from her overlarge shirt. “Have you seen this woman?”

I took the wrinkled paper. A grayscale missing poster, the central heading bolded and capitalized in case I missed the point. A woman with hair that could have been anything from blonde to electric blue stared out at me,⁴⁵ smiling, her pointed chin tucked coyly towards one shoulder. Sylvia Peregrine. I couldn’t help glancing behind me at where Fshwiw had disappeared.

I had listened very closely to her songs, after all.

“What are you looking at?” The girl asked, craning her neck to try to peer past me.

“Nothing.” I pushed the paper back into her hands. “Sorry, I haven’t seen her. I have food on the stove, so—”

⁴³ Andrea (Andi) Edwards, b. 1995, the daughter of Edwards & Sons (& Daughter) Fisheries, the ex-lover of Sylvia Peregrine, the second editor of Fshwiw’s stories, the little voice at the bottom of the page. Me.

⁴⁴ When I first read this, I was amused but not surprised that I’d gotten animal imagery thrown at me so soon. “Her short black hair seemed to bristle up...” and what’s unspoken there? That I bristled like a stray cat or a wild dog, scared or furious. Like I didn’t have every reason to be. Reader, I don’t like being personal, but you need to know some background.

Two and a half months. That’s how long Sylvia had been missing, and the first round of flyers were faded and rain-spotted or else torn down completely. Then, finally, Martin Nguyen said over the radio that he’d just seen a little dinghy that looked like ours tied up at the docks on Waldron. Dad and I hauled in the nets early, caught hardly anything, and got out to Waldron, where it’s always too quiet. We found the boat. Pine needles and rainwater pooled at the bottom, making bad tea, and I ran my hand over the spot on the gunwale where my brothers and I had scratched our names. “I’m going to ask around,” I said.

My dad looked at me. He’d been trying the motor, which was resolutely dead. The wrinkles between his eyebrows had gone deep. “Andi.”

“I’m going. Catch up if you want.” I took the woods at a run, backpack of flyers banging against my spine. She was here, I kept thinking. She’d been here the whole time. And then at the first house, this tall guy with blond hair going floppy answered the door, glaring at me with the scowl that self-important people use when no one they care about is watching.

⁴⁵ The text at the bottom of the poster listed her most recent hair color (lavender) along with her eye color, height, weight, age, all the tattoos that I could remember, and a few other things. She spoke French and some Russian. The tattoo on the back of her left bicep wasn’t finished yet. Her top right canine tooth tucked in towards her front teeth, and I’d chosen that photo in particular because you could see it.

But when I started to push the door closed, her knuckly hand slapped flat against it, and one booted foot snuck over the threshold. “I don’t want to intrude,” she said, intruding, the menace in her voice growing, “But we found her boat down at the docks, and your place is closest.”

“Like I said, I haven’t seen her.” This was half-true. I’d only seen her legs. As for whether Fshwiw had gotten the limbs fairly—we’d talk about that once the little trespasser was gone. “I’ll keep an eye out. Thanks. You can leave now.”

She was staring over my shoulder again, and I looked back to see a few pink curls flip out of sight. *Christ*, I thought. Then the door slammed into my jaw.⁴⁶

Knocked back, reeling against the wall, an explosion of pain below my molars—I barely registered the black-haired girl darting through the door and sprinting for Fshwiw. Her yells were the first thing to cut through the pain. “Sylvie? Sylvie?”

I pushed myself upright and lunged down the hall after her. Skidded past the dining room—ahead of me, footsteps, something clattering to the ground, a short yelp—and flung myself into the kitchen—just in time to see the black-haired girl freeze, her mouth hanging open, her eyes on Fshwiw’s legs.⁴⁷ “What the fuck—”

Fshwiw cringed by the sink, her hands over her mouth as though she were about to throw up. As though she was scared of what would come out of her mouth. Her gaze darted to me, and I saw real fear in her for the first time since I’d stormed into the studio with a fishing rod raised above my head. She wasn’t scared of the girl. She was scared of what her voice would do to the

⁴⁶ I didn’t mean to hit him. I really didn’t. I just saw the pink hair and thought it might be Sylvia, and there I went.

⁴⁷ I knew those tattoos. Standing grizzly on the right thigh, octopus curling around the left calf, the constellation Aquarius rising on her left ankle. Raven in flight, beak wide, at the hemline of her shorts. Sunflower already fading on her right knee. Sylvia traced over it with marker on slow days, shedding her orange Grundens in the middle of the deck, Dad looking at me like, “Jesus, you had to pick this one?” I knew the texture of the scars covered by the raven’s wings, I knew what it was to kiss the mole at the tip of the grizzly’s snout, I knew how it felt to trace the crooked lines of Aquarius across that bony ankle. Sylvia’s tattoos. Sylvia’s legs. But no Sylvia in sight.

girl. In the relative silence—Fshwiw frozen, the girl stunned into stillness, me watching it all—the sound of sizzling fish flesh was overwhelming radio static. Grease smoke, the perfume of burning meat, hung in the kitchen.

“Those are Sylvia’s legs,” the girl said at last. She took a wobbling step forward. And then the smoke detector went off.

In the midst of the shrieking alarm, I leapt forward, seizing the girl around the waist and yanking her away from Fshwiw. Her booted heels pummeled my shins. Her short nails scrabbled at my arms. But I fixed my gaze on Fshwiw—kneeling now, curled up in the corner with her pink hair like a blanket around her—and I did not let go of the girl.

“Let me go! Sylvia!” Her scream was more feral than it was afraid,⁴⁸ and I dragged her back towards the front door. “Sylvia!”

“Andi?” A man’s voice, high-pitched with concern. I shoved the girl out onto the porch, and she tumbled backwards into the grasp of an older man. His thinning black ponytail flopped on his shoulders as he looked between us. “What the hell’s going on?”

His voice cracked, no toughness in the sun-browned face shot through with broken veins. I pointed at the girl, who was already trying to head back up the stairs, though the man had one hand around her upper arm. “You come back here again—” I took a deep breath. My jaw ached. “—I’ll call the police. Got it? You’re trespassing. You’re breaking and entering.”

“The girl has her legs, Dad. She has Sylvie’s legs.” One shoulder of the girl’s oversized shirt had fallen to her elbow. She trembled.

⁴⁸ Incorrect.

“Your daughter scared the shit out of my friend.” The alarm still blared behind me. I kicked the backpack down the steps, flyers spilling over the splintery wood. “Get the fuck off our property. Get some help.”

The man hesitated, and the girl whispered: “Please, Dad.”

I pulled my cell phone out of my back pocket. “No, I think I’ll just call them. Law enforcement should know about someone like her—if they don’t already. You know she hit me with the door? That’s assault.”

“We’re going!” The man leaned down and snatched the backpack up, keeping one hand on his daughter’s arm the entire time. “No need to call anyone. We’re going.”

“Dad—”

“Move,” he hissed. He met my eyes when he spoke this time, his voice clear. “Andi’s grieving, and she’s scared. I’m sorry that she frightened you. We won’t bother you again.”

And with that, he marched his daughter down towards the docks. Her protests rang back to me, the words fading as they reached the edge of the woods, and more than once I saw her tanned face—light against the shady forest and the darkening sky—flash over her shoulder to stare at me. At me on the old house’s porch, at Fshwiw hiding inside. I rooted myself in place until they’d disappeared from sight, phone waiting in my hand, heart subsiding to its normal pulse as pain settled below my molars.

Inside, I found Fshwiw crumbling a piece of fish between her fingers, the meat so burnt it looked like shiny black beetles falling past her palm and into the pan. She’d known enough to turn off the stove, but smoke still hovered around the ceiling, and the alarm wailed. So much for a romantic dinner. I reached up, brushed the button. Without its shrill noise, the silence between

us—Fshwiw’s avoidance of even my eyes—felt much heavier, pressing into my sternum like my father’s foot.

“If something burns, you open a window,” I managed to say. I slid the kitchen window open with a snap that made her flinch.

“Jon—” she said. I gritted my teeth against what I wanted to say, and agony exploded through my mouth. Later, Fshwiw said she understood: she said that the pain was like a current that carried the words out.

“What the hell just happened?” I whirled to face her, arms wide. “You stole Sylvia’s fucking legs?”

“No, no, of course I didn’t.” She was shrinking down again, her hair curtaining her. “I told you what happened. We traded. She said she didn’t have any family, that no one would mind—”

“And you believed her?”

“Yes.” The simple honesty of it kept me from saying anything else. She reached one tentative hand towards my jaw. A few rings, costume jewelry that she’d found in the attic, glittered on her fingers. She’d dressed up. I had told her it would be a special dinner. I had. “I can—I can fix your mouth, if you want.”

“Like your mother tried to fix things?” Heal it and it’s like it never happened. Fshwiw’s hand jerked back as though I’d slapped it away, and I felt I’d been slapped too. “I’m sorry.”

She turned away, rummaging in the freezer. I spoke again. “I’m sorry, Fshwiw. I just mean—you don’t have to act like her. That’s it.”

“You’re right.” She held a pack of frozen peas to my jaw, and I sank into it, grateful. One of her fingertips brushed my temple, and she pushed my hair back from my eyes. Fshwiw

swallowed. Gills open, closed, lines of deep pinkish-red sliding in and out of view. I made myself look at her eyes instead as she took a breath to speak. “I wasn’t supposed to be on this island.”

I let my fingers stroke her wrist, aiming to soothe. I always thought there was some kind of roughness to her skin—native salt or baby scales—despite how soft she was.

“Sylvia left me a little boat to go to the mainland—or wherever I wanted, actually—but I couldn’t start it.”⁴⁹ She shifted the peas so a colder region covered my cheek. “I tried to fix it for days, but I think I only made it worse. And when I left the docks, I found you, so—” She clicked her tongue, shrugged. “I didn’t care as much about trying to fix the boat.”

That day I’d found her at the docks, when she said she’d been swimming. I remembered the boat bobbing in the tide. I held her hand closer to my face, my fingers a loose bracelet around her wrist. “If you fixed it, would that have been it? Would you have just left?”

“I—” Her gaze darted away. “At first, yes. But now, it would feel wrong to leave like that.”

When I waited for her to say more, to explain, she just pressed her lips together. She always thought she needed more time to make the words come out right. “You can just say it.” I kept my voice gentle. “Whatever it is, you can just tell me.”

“If you helped me fix the boat, I wouldn’t leave,” she said. “I want to help with your work. I like telling you stories.”

⁴⁹ She’d flooded the engine. Dad opened the throttle, still hoping that she hadn’t fouled the spark plugs (she had), and kept one eye on me as though expecting me to run back to the house. I considered it. He asked questions between attempts, when the only sound was his voice and the ocean. What did I mean, the girl had Sylvia’s legs. Were the legs on a table, had I seen something horrific, had that tall guy hurt me. Was I sure that they were Sylvia’s tattoos. Did the girl look like Sylvia. If she definitely wasn’t Sylvia, then how could I know that they were her legs.

And the engine stayed flooded, flooded, flooded, spark plugs dripping gas at their ends, too soaked to ignite. I thought about the girl crouching in the corner, her legs bent out of sight, the light strange in the dusk-turning kitchen. Had I seen an octopus on her calf, or a winding wildflower bouquet? Was it a sunflower on her knee, or a simple mandala? I put my forehead on my knees. I started thinking that I didn’t know what I had seen. Only when Dad sat beside me and said we’d have to tow the boat did I move again, getting to my feet.

I hadn't worked on any kind of engine since high school, and even then I'd only helped out with my father's truck when he made it clear that I had no other options. But if it meant her staying, I'd fix her boat. I'd build her a boat. I'd sculpt a thousand driftwood ships.

Of course, it didn't matter whether or not I would have been able to fix the boat because when we arrived at the dock with a toolbox carried between us—I didn't need the help, but Fshwiw held tight to the handle regardless, her warm hand rubbing against mine—the boat was already far out into the waves, a speck of white bobbing behind a larger fishing vessel. Fshwiw dropped her side of the toolbox—my shoulder jerked down—and ran into the waves. I couldn't follow her. I could scarcely swim. I just watched as she dove and reemerged, dove and reemerged, and still the boats gained distance.⁵⁰

I'd almost lost sight of her in the growing darkness when I heard her returning, the sound not quite a wave, though she washed up like one, her hands grinding the sand beneath her. I kneeled in front of her. I couldn't tell if her face was wet with seawater or tears, but I wiped her cheeks anyway.

"It's gone," she said, her voice rising and falling, accented with the ocean. Her father's tongue reasserting itself. "It's gone, and I don't have a way out. I don't want to steal from anyone. I don't want to use my voice like that."

Under my hands, she shuddered, and I pulled her close. She clung to me, bringing the sea to my skin. "What am I going to do when you leave?" She whispered.

⁵⁰ I watched her too from the deck of the fishing boat. She stuck up from the water with her pink hair fronding around her, a pathetic look on her face. I couldn't see her legs below the waves. Eventually, I gave up on trying and went back to where my dad stood at the bulkhead. "We're telling the police, right?" I asked, and Dad sighed.

"I'll tell them we found the dinghy here," he said. "But I'm not telling them about that kid. He'd just make things difficult for you."

I said something like, "Right, because things aren't difficult for me." I didn't hear what my dad said back. I was already figuring out how to get back to the island and get the girl on her own.

I thought it was just Fshwiw who could be surprised into the truth. I surprised myself—though only because I hadn't allowed myself to think it—when I breathed out an answer. “Come with me.”

She stilled in my arms, but did not pull away. Her voice seemed to float up to me, a squeaked response. “What?”

“Come with me,” I said again. “When the residency is over—come with me, wherever I go next. I'm serious. I—I would love that.”

Her fingertips brushed my face first, as though tracing over the carvings in her once-home, checking the corners of my lips for a sarcastic smile or a grimace, any sign I didn't want her. And when she didn't find it, she crept up before me. I waited for her to close the distance. Her lips touched mine like one of us was fragile, on the brink of dissolving into seafoam. But I wanted a kiss that felt like a promise. When I pressed closer—hand splayed on her back, fingers buried in her hair—she returned it all to me.

My mind raced ahead to that hopeful future. We'd make enough from selling my sculptures at the festival to stay in hotels if we wanted, or we could camp out the back of my car and eat expensive meals. Sushi under the stars. Fresh strawberries at sunrise. Rain pattering against the roof and running down the windows while we curled up together in our nest of blankets and pillows and a squashed mattress in the trunk. Her bare hips with their fault-line coloring pressed to my hips, my sunburned nose touching the nape of her dark neck.

I fell back on the sand with her, and the last of the day's sunlight soaked into my spine. Her laughter rang against my lips. I thought this was how her songs felt underwater. I thought I would be able to feel that laughter for the rest of my life.

Appendix 1: Author's Note on Narrators

Because of the multiple narrators in this work, I feel I should start this note by saying that this is an explanation of *Upwelling*'s structure and is not meant to be read as part of the text itself.

I began working on *Upwelling* while I was still an undergraduate, and my initial idea was based around a reimagining of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." In this version, the loss of the mermaid's voice is not literal, but figurative, emerging from who has control over a story: who decides what stories are told, who narrates and who edits, who is believable and who is untrustworthy. Control is another way of saying "power" here. A person whose story is trusted is a person with social capital, a quality that has emotional and material consequences for others involved in their narrative.

This thesis was present but muddied in earlier versions, and it developed through my graduate studies, particularly as I learned more about the history of fairy tales. As a brief overview, fairy tales in Europe were originally primarily oral narratives that largely originated from peasant classes and reflected their concerns and desires; however, following the invention of the printing press, fairy tales transitioned to a printed medium and skewed towards the ideologies of their new audience, the middle and upper classes (Zipes 21-23; Bacchilega 3). Scholars like Jack Zipes argue that the removal from an oral context, which is characterized by direct audience involvement and flexible storytelling practices, has caused the sanitization and stagnation of the original tales (Zipes 23-24). They became less accessible to their original working-class audience, a process that has continued into the modern day with Disney adaptations (Zipes 24; Bacchilega 2). However, even when appearing in their original oral context, fairy tales "also, to some degree, rely on and reinforce social norms" of the communities

telling them (Bacchilega 7). Fairy tales--and folk tales/oral histories more generally--can be a liberatory and subversive genre, but they can also be conventional and unchanging. Telling (or writing) them is always a motivated act.

I've strived to communicate this idea in *Upwelling*, not only through the multiple narrators struggling for control over the story, but also through the smaller tales that appear within the chapters. Songstories from the Salishan mer's *Upwelling* recount culturally important events and diminish contrarian narratives; Angelic's stories about her childhood, told to her daughter, pass on her heritage but also haunt Fshwiw into adulthood. As for the narrators themselves, Fshwiw's lengthy chapters are written in her own voice (albeit mediated through her work with Jon) that require the audience to trust her illustrations of an unfamiliar society. She first passes on her stories orally, and evidence remains of this mode in the written versions, as she sometimes directly addresses her audience. She is mostly unaware of the revisions to her work, in large part because she cannot read when she first comes ashore. As such, her role reflects the peasant class cited by Zipes, including material concerns: Fshwiw's stories secure her a safe place to live.

When her story reaches the other two narrators, their editorial impulses reveal their divergent intentions. Jon interjects with emotionally-motivated translator's notes in Fshwiw's chapters and divides her chapters with interludes chronicling their lives on land. He identifies with her due to their similar backgrounds while simultaneously idolizing her as a magical being and therefore failing to recognize her nuanced personhood or extend grace for her failings. His behavior continues what Christina Bacchilega describes as "that long tradition of representing woman both as nature and as concealed artifice," and therefore limits Fshwiw's agency in her own story (9). In his perspective, Fshwiw is singular, without equal or community, whether she

is placed on a pedestal or thrown into disfavor. By contrast, Andi, the final narrator who appears in the footnotes, provides sociohistorical context and undermines Jon's trustworthiness. She deliberately connects Fshwiw's stories back to the *hsifsh* language, to multiple mer cultures and histories, and to her own friendship with Fshwiw. Revealing Jon's (sometimes willful) ignorance enables Andi to ameliorate his authority within the story and restore credibility to Fshwiw's original work, though her own deep dislike of Jon makes her not entirely reliable.

Since my thesis is not a full draft, I want to outline here how these attempts at control shift across the story; a more complete outline appears after this note. In the chapters I included (three stories from Fshwiw and three interludes from Jon), the speakers largely maintain their roles. The main exception to this is the final interlude, which concludes with Andi's appearance as a character in the main text and her contestation of Jon's version of the story in the footnotes. During the novel's second arc, Jon and Fshwiw continue their romantic relationship, and their voices overlap and even merge in places (e.g., Fshwiw speaks more about the present than the past, and Jon's translator notes include more anecdotes about his own past). However, Andi's continued presence in their lives causes friction. By the end of this arc, Jon grows more jealous and possessive of Fshwiw, and his interjections grow longer and more frequent. Fshwiw's voice diminishes in importance as Jon increasingly doubts her accounts. Cooperation and shared power shifts to domination, which is reflected in who is present on the page.

In response, Andi's footnotes lose the small amount of impartiality they'd maintained. Her stories become more personal, delving into her family history and her growing friendship with Fshwiw in an attempt to supply the missing portions of Fshwiw's narrative. The novel's final chapters are told entirely in Andi's voice as she recounts Jon's transition from emotional to physical abuse, her rescue of Fshwiw, Fshwiw's act of vengeance against Jon, and her own

newfound acceptance of her greater role. She is not only an editor, but a storyteller in her own right. By moving Andi's voice from the footnotes to the main text in the finale, the book's visual structure mimics the event of the Upwelling: a person and their history burst from a deep, marginal space to assert a central place in the story.

I look forward to speaking with you more about my choices, and I hope that you've enjoyed what you read. Thank you for being on my committee.

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Appendix 2: Chapter Outline

Translator's Note:

Jon introduces the situation: he is an sculptor completing an artist-in-residence program on Waldron Island, an extremely isolated island in Washington state. While there, he meets Fshwiw, a young woman from the Salish Sea mer, and she tells him stories about her life that he uses as the basis for his sculptures. It's clear that he and Fshwiw are in a romantic relationship, though footnotes from Andi challenge Jon's assertion that this partnership is a healthy one.

Part 1:

Chapter 1: Fshwiw recounts her early childhood experiences of the Upwelling and touches on her experience of coming ashore on Sylvia's legs.

Interlude: April 2018: Jon recalls his first meeting with Fshwiw, their agreement regarding her stories, and the immediate aftermath of Fshwiw's first song. He bonds with Fshwiw because of their mutually absent mothers.

Chapter 2: Fshwiw explores her mother's background and the impact of her mother on her childhood and her parents' relationship.

Interlude: May 2018: Jon experiences increasing attraction to Fshwiw, as well as sudden fear when she disappears from the Artist's House. He finds her at the shoreline, alongside an abandoned speedboat.

Chapter 3: At Jon's request, Fshwiw tells the story of the start of her romance with Hssh. We also learn more about Fshwiw's adolescence and how the village treats her. Fshwiw finds that her siren voice can be a gift.

Interlude: June 2018: Andi confronts Fshwiw and Jon at the Artist's House after finding the speedboat (which belongs to her and Sylvia). After Andi takes the

speedboat, Fshwiw panics about her future, and Jon promises to care for her. They kiss.

Chapter 4: Fshwiw discusses her life on land and all its discoveries through the lens of her new relationship with Jon; notably, she addresses him directly throughout the chapter through the use of “you.” The final chapter in each arc uses “you” and signals a greater encroachment on Jon’s part into the story. In this case, the chapter is meant to read as a love letter, albeit one where the speaker is self-conscious about her audience.

Interlude: July 2018: On a solo grocery trip to the mainland, Fshwiw meets Andi again, who pleads with her to tell the truth about Sylvia.

Part 1 Footnotes: Andi’s footnotes mostly add context about mer history and culture, although there are a few that allude to a future friendship with Fshwiw and/or disparage Jon. In the third and fourth interludes, Andi narrates her own parts in the stories and reveals more of her emotions and personal history.

Part 2:

Chapter 5: Fshwiw speaks more about her experiences with Sylvia and other interactions with “lubbers,” some gleaned from the Upwelling and others from personal experience.

Interlude: August 2018: Fshwiw contacts Andi and offers to tell the truth, which results in an argument with Jon. However, they (appear to) resolve the conflict.

Chapter 6: Fshwiw divulges more about her mother’s background, as well as insights that she learned about her father. Hssh plays an important role in discovering the truth about Fshwiw’s father.

Interlude: September 2018: While Fshwiw spends a day with Andi, Jon is wracked with anxiety. He gets Fshwiw to tell him about Andi when she returns and discourages her from meeting with Andi again. Fshwiw refuses.

Chapter 7: Fshwiw recounts the middle of her relationship with Hsssh, which is characterized by a looming threat of marriage for Hsssh and increasing conflict over their shared future. Hsssh wants to leave; Fshwiw wants to be accepted by the village. Fshwiw improves her siren powers with Hsssh's help.

Interlude: October 2018: Jon arranges a date night with Fshwiw and asks that she spend more time with him working on songs and sculptures. Fshwiw, somewhat reluctant, agrees.

Chapter 8: Fshwiw addresses Jon directly in this chapter again, expressing devotion and understanding based on their similar backgrounds. Jon's interjections account for roughly half of the chapter. The use of "you" in this chapter feels more like an enchantment or a witness statement, and it's clear that Fshwiw's control over her own story is slipping.

Interlude: November 2018: Jon acts possessive of Fshwiw's voice, body, and time; he follows Fshwiw when she leaves on a walk and sees her dive into the ocean (which she does because of a request from Andi). He waits for hours, falling asleep, and Fshwiw wakes him when she returns. She is uncomfortable that he followed her, but Jon doesn't apologize.

Part 2 Footnotes: While Andi still has contextualizing footnotes in this section, they are smaller proportionally when compared to notes about her firsthand experiences with Fshwiw and their growing friendship. While their early

encounters are still hostile—as when Andi attempts to convince Fshwiw to go back to her village to look for Sylvia, which Fshwiw flatly refuses to do at first—there are also moments of tenderness, attraction, and cooperation, most notably when Andi begins teaching Fshwiw how to read. Andi also reveals more about her personal life in this part, including her relationship with Sylvia, her family history, and her Snohomish heritage. One important footnote reveals that her great-grandfather was one of the workers who built the Artist’s House at the start of the Great Depression. He lived in the abandoned house with his family for several years during the Depression, completing the house and constructing a shallow tunnel out of the house in case they were discovered by unfriendly white Washingtonians.

Part 3:

Chapter 9: Fshwiw returns once again to her experiences with the Upwelling, this time recounting her attempt to sing alone into the abyss as an adolescent and the consequences when she is caught. Her relationship with her mother worsens.

Interlude: December 2018: Jon and Fshwiw attempt to enjoy the winter and Christmas, but Jon grows jealous when Andi delivers a gift to Fshwiw. When Fshwiw attempts to leave during the ensuing argument, she slips on the front steps and twists her ankle. Jon cares for her. It’s uncomfortable.

Chapter 10: Fshwiw delicately draws connections between her present feelings of isolation and the final parts of her parents’ stories: namely, how her parents met and ended up returning to the Salish Sea.

Interlude: January 2019: Although Jon relents and “gives” Fshwiw more time with Andi, he still follows them when the two women visit Andi’s family. He is quietly hostile towards Fshwiw when she returns. Fshwiw leaves again in the middle of the night, and Jon locks the door behind her. He later asks that a security system be installed, citing Andi’s presence on the property.

Chapter 11: Fshwiw divulges what caused the end of her relationship with Hsssh, which is the same event that led to her mother leaving (a group of sirens doing ecological repair along the Pacific coast find her mother and invite her along; Angelic and Hsssh leave, but Fshwiw stays). However, Fshwiw’s account leaves out important details, which Jon notices.

Interlude: February 2019: Jon repeatedly confronts/intimidates/bullies Fshwiw about her behavior until she relents and agrees to tell him the truth. She first tells him about what’s been happening with Andi (learning to read, reconnecting with her dad), and when he doesn’t believe her, she agrees to also tell him the bigger secret: what actually happened with her mom.

Chapter 12: This short chapter fills in the gaps of Chapter 11; essentially, Angelic attempted to force Fshwiw to leave with her. Fshwiw, in an act of desperation, used her siren voice, and inadvertently drove away not only her mother, but also the entirety of the village, which was empty for a week, its residents scattered around the Salish Sea. Upon her return, Hsssh is furious that Fshwiw didn’t agree to leave with the sirens, which would have allowed her and Fshwiw to have an accepted relationship without heterosexual marriage. Hsssh follows the sirens, leaving Fshwiw behind.

Interlude: Jon feels deeply betrayed and throws himself into work on the sculptures. He largely ignores Fshwiw except for when she opts to spend time with Andi, at which point he is passive aggressive towards her. Fshwiw is apologetic.

Chapter 13: In this last “you” address to Jon, Fshwiw apologizes and professes her continuing fondness for Jon. However, Andi’s footnotes reveal that this passage was heavily edited, and that on her last night with Fshwiw, her friend felt very differently about the situation.

Afterword: Jon’s final interlude tells the audience that Fshwiw has disappeared. He bids her farewell and expresses his deep hurt and gratitude.

Part 3 Footnotes: As this part progresses, Andi’s footnotes take on an increasingly angry and urgent tone. She repeatedly contradicts Jon and calls out his behavior. However, there are also plenty of footnotes about her affectionate (but not *quite* romantic) relationship with Fshwiw, which range from continuing to teach Fshwiw to read, to weathering a storm together, to introducing Fshwiw to her family. The two also bond over their renewed attempts to connect to estranged family members (Fshwiw to her father, Andi to her mother), thus prioritizing growth and healing.

Part 4:

Part 4 differs from the previous sections in that it is told entirely from Andi’s perspective in the body of the text, rather than the footnotes. I anticipate that this will be at least two to three short chapters.

Andi first recounts the two weeks leading up to the art festival where Jon will present his sculptures. She can’t get in touch with Fshwiw, and when she goes to the Artist’s House to

attempt to force a meeting, Jon gaslights her and calls the police. Andi returns late that night after Jon has headed to the mainland, wriggles through the tunnel to avoid the security system, and finds Fshwiw locked in the attic.

Fshwiw tells Andi what happened: she found Jon's version of the songs and confronted him about the content of her final chapter, saying that he was also lying through the stories, and worse than that, he had made her lie in the final chapter by twisting her words. She tried to leave, but Jon stopped her, and when she attempted to use her siren voice to get him to move aside, Jon struck her and imprisoned her in the attic.

Fshwiw is furious and wants to get her stories back, and Andi reluctantly agrees to take her to the mainland only after Fshwiw threatens to go alone. They arrive at the site of the festival as Jon gives his opening remarks in front of his sculptures arranged on the shore. Fshwiw summons a huge wave to sweep the art away, and though the wave parts around Jon, he is swept away anyway when he tries to seize one of his sculptures. Chaos ensues on shore, and Andi urges Fshwiw to flee as the police arrive. They say goodbye to each other—agreeing to find each other when they're ready—before Fshwiw dives into water that is still infused with her vocal magic. As a wave crests, Andi sees Fshwiw inside the water, and imagines/hallucinates Fshwiw's long pink tail propelling her forward alongside a school of ghostly merfolk.

When the wave sinks and Fshwiw vanishes, Andi finds Jon and pulls him out of the water. As he recovers, Andi snatches the flash drive with Fshwiw's stories from around Jon's neck and hides it. The police believe a rogue wave swept away Jon's sculptures, despite Jon's protests to the contrary about his "crazy girlfriend."

Andi tells us that she spends over a year researching and editing *Upwelling*, but now that she's finished, she is going to move on. She leaves a note with her parents for Fshwiw and sets out on a road trip.