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THE SIREN

Barbara Lock

Rapid Eye Movement

As a girl, Celia dreams of beautiful juvenile creatures eating her body; wide-eyed koalas and possums gnaw on her pale forearms and long fingers, silent baby birds tangle in her fine black hair. She floats in a glass pool ringed by patches of blue flag iris and weeping willow. Precious striped ducklings nab pieces of her flank, crayfish hang from her toes, leaches drain her away. A dragnet catches her with other aquatic animals, squid and rockfish and striped bass all hauled out of a dark ocean near a nameless pier of elephantine boulders. Fishermen discard some bodies, select others for the salty conveyor belt. In the dream, Celia feels no shame.

A strange legless man hops on two curved blades. The blades are modern metal springs which emerge from the stumps of severed thighs. The man catches Celia, binds her hands and feet, positions her for display among the other finds. This one sure is something, says the man. Not any old ordinary body. This one is high in beautiful hunger, multi-colored nostalgia, mutual intrigue. How much?

In the dream, there is a special customer, a regal, dark-eyed aquatic. Does he, too, have no legs? Celia can't tell, for a table hides the lower half of his body. The customer's flat black hair falls in a braid down his back. His skin glitters as if scaled. The customer makes an offer to Spring-For-Legs for Celia's body, but he refuses thrice, until the price of her body rises beyond any reasonable cost for a human being. There is lightning to the north, but no one can hear its sound, only its thought. Money changes hands. The customer collects Celia, and when he folds her into a large white cooler, she can see that his lower half resembles that of an elongated fish, or a water snake. He's a Triton. To Celia, the Triton exudes good will. He wants her, paid good money for her. He'll take care of her. He flicks his coiled tail, shuts her in.

The dream recurs in Celia's nighttime mind for years, decades. The scene, a movie which replays in her head each night, comforts her with its exact replication, reliability. The same existents, camera angles, pacing, dialog, choreography, all of

it, until one moonless night, the film melts inside the projector, the story compresses, dialog curtails. Celia's price drops. The Triton cuts her bindings, sets her before him in his serpentine loop. Barnacles cling to his back and shoulders; smaller encrustations on his jaw quiver as he opens his mouth to sing.

Celia wakes in tears. She stumbles to the bathroom, but her fingers can't make the faucet work.

Retreat

The way her husband Brandon drives: fingers gripped around the leather-clad steering wheel, flicking the car this way and that along the narrow, curved road by the lake. The steep cliffs above shield them from the sun. The turns in the road offer a certain swerving cadence; colossal rock to the left, unbearably silver water to the right, each competing for awe. There are women out there in the lake, they must be women, and they are wading to their thighs, gently, gently, hems wet with pure chill. It must be wonderful to do anything that comes into your head. Anything that they think, they can do. But thinking, in isolation and without movement, is it enough? Can it be a life? Celia turns to look at her husband, at his fingers, wonders if he will ever think to touch her again.

"That's just another example of how I pay attention and you don't," Brandon tells her casually. "I've been collecting baseball cards for years. Did you forget, or did you not notice in the first place?" His white linen shirt is speckled with whiter paint, his intentionally muscled arms, coarse black hairs among freckles, the pivot of his elbow revealing a thick blue vein. Each of his fingers seems its own powerful animal capable of anything, anything at all. Celia remembers when they first met how afraid she was of touching his bare skin, touching any part of that capable body, imagining instant electrical discharge, neuromuscular collapse, her heart drowning in its own blood. It was silliness, of course. Acres of deep water surrounded by dry mountains—how had she overcome it? How did they first touch? These questions ping around her body, knock things loose, poke holes. And why is he looking at her like that now? What did he ask her? Something about baseball.

"I just thought you played in college," Celia ventures. She fumbles at her purse for sunglasses, can't unzip the top.

"Obviously," says Brandon. "But everyone knows who he is anyway."

“Obviously,” Celia says quietly, the word thick in her mouth.

Roadside Stand

In the distance, towards California, Brandon can see a white motorboat curving away. Closer in, a father and his three-year-old are kneeling on a paddleboard. The girl in a red life preserver. Her father has none. The father’s arms are long enough to envelope the girl, paddling with her holding on to his wrists. The girl pushes, pulls, turns, pushes, pulls, turns. The pair are a dream Brandon once had, a filmy idea of what a father should be: loving, protective, productive of healthy offspring. Brandon looks over at Celia, in a white sun dress, leaning against the hot blue hood of the coup. She is a dream too, of what a mother should be. His body grows cold—the finding and sorting, the matching and unmatching. He will have to start over, he thinks.

“How many should I buy?” he calls to her.

“I’m not eating those,” says Celia flatly. “They’re bottom-feeders.” Brandon shakes his head, hands money to the fisherman for a mesh bag of a dozen palm-sized live crayfish. The fisherman catches Celia’s eye, stares, delves into her mind as if entering a pool, holds her there, paralyzed. Celia sees herself underwater, swarmed by many somethings crawling on the sandy bottom. The fisherman releases her with a wink, swings his head to pick up the crayfish. Celia sees his flat black hair braided down his back.

“It’s time,” the fisherman calls to Celia.

“Time for what?” asks Brandon.

“She knows,” says the fisherman.

Nevada

Ornately pinnacled cliffs, cold clear water. Brandon submerges the crayfish for later, vanishes towards the concession. Celia, on the beach, pinches her toes as hard as she can, feels the lack of feeling in them. She finds two small pebbles and uses them to wrench at the flesh on her heel. Nothing. Celia takes a crayfish from

the bag in the water, puts it in the lake next to her foot.

“Eat it,” she says to the crayfish. The animal scurries out to the deep.

Tell Me the Name of Pain

Families from Reno rub suntan lotion onto tattoos; outdoor-types ready personal watercraft. Children purchase ice cream from a low-roofed concession with money nagged from a mother’s boyfriend. A mother sits on the lap of the boyfriend, facing him, her legs wrapped around his waist. If her eyes were open, she would see the cliffs, not her two little girls in polka dot bikinis in the water. The mother’s eyes are closed.

A spit of land rises before it falls again, supports shrubby pines where flowered towels drape to dry. California beckons with haze. Teenage boys jump into the water from a height and try to touch the lakebed with their toes. Celia watches, sighs.

“Don’t worry about them. You never liked to swim anyway,” says Brandon, drinking a beer. He works his fingers through the rough sand, tracing a perimeter around his body. “Do you remember that river in North Carolina after that freak blizzard?” he asks, “the French Broad? Where that canoe sank out from under you during the flash flood, and you bumped along the rapids until you swam to shore, nearly missing the dam?”

“I didn’t know you then,” says Celia, poking at her feet with a dry twig of pine. “Why would you tell me my own story?”

“You lost your camp stove,” says Brandon, “and one of the canoes was busted.”

“That’s true,” says Celia, nauseated. Her poking progresses to the side of her ankle. A wasp lands on her leg and she watches for a moment, noticing its sensory inconspicuousness. The wasp marches up, nearly to the knee, and makes as if to sting her before Celia flicks it away. She tries to stand, but loses her balance and falls back into the sand. Brandon feints as if to hold on to her elbow, but fails to even touch her.

“Why’d you let it do that?” asks Brandon.

"I don't know what to call it," says Celia. There is a word on the horizon, an idea that seems to matter to her, but she can't bring it to mind. Somehow, in the daily fluctuations of speaking and reading and writing language, she has lost an entire word, a commonplace unit of thought. She feels so forlorn about this lost word, like a death foretold, that she starts to weep.

Brandon checks on his crayfish, but they are gone.

Derelict

Two broodlings in polka-dot bikinis cavort in the liquid green; the small one wears red-dots-on-white, the older white-on-red. They clamber onto a sloping boulder about ten feet out into the water, stand at attention. The sibling girls shiver at the crown of the rock. Sun glints off of their light-yellow hair and down along their strong and rounded thighs. Celia finds their splendor unendurable. She hears a high-pitched alarm, like a sharp doorbell, but sees nothing on the beach but bored glib beings about to pour and spill drinks. Boys pack sand into buckets for castles. The polka-dotted girls jump off of the nearest boulder and swim to the next one out.

No, you cannot know the meaning of love by watching other people's children, that's just not true.

Profess My Affection

Brandon is loose. He takes a running jump off of the rise and submerges beneath the mirror surface of the lake. His dark shadow reappears a moment later, swimming towards her, flickering under branches and silver ripples. His head emerges first, a beautiful round forehead, longish black hair just starting to recede, smile lines at the eyes, those arms again, waist strong, legs dripping. Celia hands him a towel and watches as he raises the hairs on his legs with his own rubbing, watches him wrap himself in white, perching next to her, weight centered on his toes as if he might need to run.

"I almost bought Lou Gherig's card at a pawn shop up Las Vegas three years ago," says Brandon. "It was a 1933 Goudey, very clean, PSA 8. He was leaning into a left-handed baseball swing, you know." Brandon stands to imitate the pose. He swings through an imaginary pitch and watches the invisible baseball sail over the lake

and into the afternoon sun: a home run. Brandon stares out for several moments before turning back to Celia. "I think he only lived a couple of years after the diagnosis. His body failed, and soon he couldn't even breathe," says Brandon.

"Um," says Celia.

"What are we going to do, Celia? Things are different these days, bodies can be kept alive much longer. How do you want to go about it?"

"I can't remember," says Celia. "I don't think it ever came up before." Brandon shakes his head, shifts from side to side. Stray drips of water slink down his legs.

"So. You know how people at cocktail parties enjoy flirting with friends and neighbors but then go home to have sex with their spouse?" he asks.

"I guess so."

"We could be like that."

"Okay."

"Except that instead of just you I might have lovers also," Brandon ventures. "Probably only one at a time, though." He watches Celia's face closely.

"I'm not sure what you expect me to say at this point," says Celia with great control. The mother of the polka-dotted girls has gotten off of her boyfriend and searches the water. Celia wonders: why bother?

"I just think it might be a way to solve the problem of your failing body, you know?" Brandon says.

"Correction," Celia says. "That solves the problem of whose body you are going to use when mine fails. There's a difference." Celia digs her legs into the sand. The sand feels hot on the surface, cool underneath. Tiny waves of pain lap at her soul. Only tiny. She is surprised the waves aren't larger, the water deeper. The lakebed slopes steeply towards a desolate cold hell. In front of her, the mother of the polka-dot girls shouts minute names: *Becky, Liz! You've gone too far! Come back!*

"Honey," says Brandon. "What are we pretending for?" Celia grabs more sand, folds it over her legs. *Becky! Liz!*

“Okay,” she says softly. Celia stares at the expanse of blue, blown birds, sailboats flitting among waves of miracles and demonstrated light. There is something out there that she can almost see, a faint ellipse in the way the water glistens green-yellow with patchy sun. It is a circle, a fairy ring in the diamond-patterned current. “Maybe,” Celia continues. “I need to understand better. It doesn’t feel right, yet.”

“What doesn’t?” Brandon says, but he has stopped paying attention. He is watching the young mother: *Liz! Becky! Come back here right now!* Celia keeps folding sand onto her legs. What doesn’t feel right? What is feeling? Her body will arrest, all experience of feeling and motion will settle in memory of who she used to be, the perimeter guarded by attack dogs, cringing parents wishing to fare better next time. How weighty is the cost and risk of keeping her alive to think when she can no longer move? Is her mind, alone, worth it? Once there was an Eden green with knowledge, bursting forth from sun-swept branches, thunder simply the sound of rapid energy transfer, rain simply the way people remembered how to cry, which is love, an atmospheric river hungry to create, bursting with free will. What doesn’t feel right? What is right? Is it detectable, swaying and sinking on the surface of our minds? Two enemy truths, the truth thought and the truth felt, grappling with each other in a crow’s nest. Which is right? Does one truth announce *I am right?* Does the other wave a white flag? The little girls on the far boulder wave to their mother, who motions for them to return to the beach. Brandon is relieved that he doesn’t have to intervene in some unspecified way, decides he needs another drink. *Celia, dearest, what doesn’t feel right*, he doesn’t say.

“An open marriage.” She can barely get the words out. “I’ll think about it.” Did he hear her? She isn’t sure, for Brandon hasn’t reacted, walks away again.

“I’m going to get us margaritas,” he says. “Is there anything else you want?”

“Yes,” Celia says loudly, “I want to go out there. Put me on one of those.”

Lyric

The whole of a woman is a work of art. She is, for each of us, all that we see in her.

Retrospective

Afterwards, newspaper articles will cite the lifetime odds of drowning as approximately one in twelve hundred. That this number includes people who never set foot in a body of water, people without degenerative neuromuscular disease and too many margaritas in their system, people with a desire to live, will be lost on most readers.

Lost or Leaving

Celia surveys the shore from the rented paddleboard, sees families playing at being more or less happy. The legs with which she kneels feel like cheap imitations. She moves beyond the spit, beyond the last granite monolith at the south entrance to the cove, until she is free from the sight of people. She can still hear them, voices shrill and dull. She can hear Brandon calling to her to come back, but for what? Her hands feel numb, incoherent, clumsy, as if her fingers had been dipped in glue and partially dried in position. Each time she rotates the paddle to the other side of the board, she unclenches and rubs the fingers that rest on the top of the handle, just to make sure they belong.

Celia hears the tinkling voices of the polka-dotted girls before she sees them, heads peeking over the top of the last boulder now, bodies wet and vigorous, eyes wide. The small one stands regarding Celia for a few moments, before pointing and shouting.

“Look it’s a Siren!”

“No, Becky, that’s not one,” says the older girl. “She’s not drowned.”

“But her song,” says Becky. “I like the way it sounds.” Liz squints, listens. “Do you hear it?” Becky asks.

Celia turns on the board, turns to watch the girls, and as she does so, the blade of her paddle strikes the deck’s edge, strikes it unnaturally, as if the paddle has been pulled or yanked first. The paddle should float. Instead, it drops from her grip into the depths. Celia peers over the edge of the board at the sinking blade, then flattens herself on her belly to watch until it is out of sight. Her hands dangle in the water; a coolness travels up her limbs. Suddenly she feels a sick, pericardial longing for something she can no longer have. Why not go into the cold lake? Gently, gently, down below the filtered mountain light, green, then teal. Bubbles

rise, fish find things of interest about her body, dart in to taste her, swim away into the broken fragments of gold. A figure, a woman with long and flowing black hair. Do not count on her! She is not to be trusted! She wears a white ruffled dress, ragged conquest, prey to the latest fashion. The harvests of every sea, every sailor, every lover, every mother, floating in the cold depths in a ring, tiny flashes peak and trough, peak and trough, oscillation is the future of all thought. Do not count on her! She is not to be trusted! Pale, dark-haired sirens guard the gates of danger. They're not corpses, not even human, more like iridescent fish in a sea of eyes finding a sky in every transmission. Skulls molt in the cemetery of the living wave. Surrender. I've known a lot, a lot, thinks Celia. The usual subterfuges, origin and destination, the flesh of her own soul. Gently now, is this all I get? This sincere searching within, this fearless gaze—never turn your eyes from nature, unwelcome though the sight may be. Pretty stranded seaweeds wend through perfect limbs. It will be necessary to find the floor. Ten thousand crayfish march like cows, a striking achievement of fecundity. Account must be taken of dinner tables and our desires.

In the center, marshalling all thought, is her magnificent iridescent Triton.

Blood Sisters

Becky and Liz make a pact: they will swim to the drifting paddleboard. From there they will be able to see what the sirens are doing to the lady.

Knowledge

"You are mine by rights," says the Triton to Celia. It is not a sound, but the suggestion of it, a tuneful thrum deep inside. His giant image undulates in the green depths. Fish hide among living corals on the Triton's calcified scales. His tail swipes the sandy bottom. "And yet," he frowns, "you are free to leave." But why ever would she leave? Here, there are no restrictions, no transitions. Not merely a thinking machine, nor a poet reciting meticulous lines fabricated from remnants of compromise, but a whole woman. Whole. Here, she is in agreement with herself. *Agreement*. That is the very word she has been trying to remember. Agreement: absence of incompatibility; harmony. She is alive in her heart again, her ancient heirloom. What are we waiting for? There is nothing underneath the stars worth staring at except the sea.

Her body senses the waves. Her mind resonates with an unsung song. If there are discrete thoughts, they wash over her without intention. She is nothing, everything. The circle of sirens joins her hands. If she finds the surface: her speech will boil away, her arms and legs will disobey. A machine will fill her lungs with air, and her spirit will abandon her. She chooses her spirit.

A pulse of movement above.

Retrospective

A yellowing papyrus encases a single paddle in a narrow coffin-like frame on the wall. A police siren, affixed with a green wig, blinks at the top of a pillar of stone. Titanium and wood representations of the swimming girls are suspended from the ceiling; dots of red run down their legs and into bodiless claws of some kind of glimmering sea witch. Light-reflective glass powder and translucent layers build depth in the sculptures and paintings; the canvas which dominates the brick wall across from the bar features tens of thousands of brush strokes illustrating a roiling sea in pink and red. The painting, which gleams with energy, is entitled “myofibrillary agency,” a title which artist Brandon Whitfield declines to explain. When asked if any of the art was inspired by his first wife, Whitfield says: “I prefer to let my art honor the living rather than the dead.”

BARBARA LOCK, an emergency physician, pursues a writing MFA at Sarah Lawrence College. Her fiction appears in *New Delta Review* (11.1), *Fiction International* (Algorithm), *Best Short Stories from the Saturday Evening Post* *Great American Fiction Contest 2020*, and elsewhere.