

Carry On

By Jennifer Fortin

The water licks the raft and beads off it. Like lickin' a wound already scab-crusted.

And all this in my head, I mean in it, no way to get it out but speak it aloud sometimes and I am too old. I'm afraid that my edge-of-mouth wrinkles gasp up the words like an arid desert, greedy with sporadic-come water's nourishment. The aesthetic-ness of hydrogen, oxygen, hydrogen. We want to consume order, my voice says inside when I wax waxy-philosophical. Wax resists, too; reminds me of the raft. Desert-wrinkles even do feel like sandy sandpaper paper-thin skin. How close am I to dyin', dyin' this thinly? What distance from dyin' am I?

If I touch my face, it's parchment for the scribes. Scribes in ancient Egypt careful, careful, careful, soakin' dark inks into them scrolls with the frilly edges. Dark inks declarin' important symbols and important gods in profile, their god-legs invariably so rooted to the ground sideways underneath a front-view chest and then it goes sideways again all the way to that starin', stylized eye. Tricky gods: Amun-Re, Anubis, Osiris.

Tricky, too, the wrinkled-gaspin'-up of certain words here, others, there, so I don't even know what-all's trippin' out of my mouth anymore, the streams sputterin' like a sun-shower, ostensible meteorological impossibility, rain under a ball of sunshine, tiny-orb-planet unreachable waaaay up. Inaccessible and haughty-like, that high ball, the abrupt rain underneath it embarrassing in its unlikeliness. Me feelin' like a hieroglyphic, or hieroglyphic-pattern-faced, only intelligible for them with an arcane background: and my background this day is the sea. It waves.

All this in my head got old over the oldening years, but at least I had the fortune of bein' with my wife until three years ago when she died. She was old, too, old and she was my reason for staying. The landscape all clouded-up with dogma and doctrine in our country. Dissident, illegal ideas about it stifled. Even though we were so mild. An island existence with a real air of disconnection. The long traditions of imprisonment and punishment and quiet vanishing, banishment, of them who don't apprehend the rhyme of this terrain—it's so deep-ingrained in the culture, inextricable like inherited epics. Just under the surface. We know we've heard 'em, there was never a time when we did not know that. We have that Greek in our blood-consciousness, and that Norse and all them elevated heroes warrin' and doin' them deus ex machina-type things. We have this in our veins but only the homeland-feelings allowed to rise.

My wife—I miss her. It aches in my heart for three years-plus. We somehow found each other there, talkin' this codified language until we understood the way we both didn't understand the system of things. We married and raced around the edges of open, but hushed, discussions and plans. Felt real like it's not so bad, since the other was there. I miss her now that she's gone, I have to stuff all these anti-what's-accepted thoughts back to my skull, it's a choking of my

brain. All organs deterioratin'. Pullin' the brains through noses. I do think I can sense what it would feel like. Thoughts snotted out, all mixed-up with blood. Tyrant tool-pullers! Thought-murd'ers, unsanitary.

Some days I feel shriveled. On the raft and also back on the island. I feel shriveled today, exposed under the sky and some sun-showers showerin' on my bald spot, my shoulders. Water climbin' the raft and, resisted, beadin' off again. I watch it, maybe for minutes and hours. Probably for minutes and hours. Trailin' my hands over the sides of the raft and into the sea, my fingers all parched and plump.

Now I've been out on this sea for I don't even know how long, it all seems like a single, long segment of time since she's been gone, but I left from there days? weeks? ago on an orange raft. I was aware from the start the danger, the orange beacon-raft inflatin' between my lips, my breath pourin' into it, pourin' my breath of last-resort and with memories of her jaw-line sayin', "I understand we understand and are the same. We will get out of here. Together. One day." Sayin' all that with no words. I miss the landscape of her body, how she'd keep herself up so that each body part exuded hope. Not sure how she did it, that clean, ordered woman with hope-stranded hair, hope-ears and hope-mole.

In the center of one night three years after she died, I decided to go. A clandestine stretch for another shore. If I stretch my arms and legs and am horizontal against the orange, I take up the entire raft, all lanky-limbed inside it. I lie so often it's as though I'm rehearsin' for somethin' that might not ever come. Lie, lie, lie. Layin' there. Lysin'. Laid, lied. Maybe it will come. The raft is perfect-sized for one man of my size. Driftin' on the waves, in sleep and out of sleep, losin' touch with the tangible and this barrier expandin'. I don't understand anymore. And don't really try.

Snatched hands out of the water on impulse! Elbows are bent and hands are inches from touchin' my face when:

"In the sea, I am the carrion," said the little fish streamin' in the place where my right hand had been. I glimpsed a keen fish-gulp-smile. "Carry on, carry on, carry on," he said.

Although this was a suggestion, the voice came out real comforting, not commandin'. His sleek and manageable head loomed at the side of the raft and he kind of spun his tail, I think, propeller-like. I wasn't completely sure he would stay submerged! His decorative scales gleamed.

"Somethin' incomprehensible," I said. That was somethin' incomprehensible. The gentle fish was not carrion! He muscled the water so tender and was not decayin'. The way it goes in the sea is biggest fish eatin' the medium ones eatin' the smallest ones, and even the smallest ones eatin' the smaller ones than them. A food chain of live things.

He fished away and my hands snuck back overboard, trailin' again. I even slept with my hands in the water. I do wake up eyes crusty with sand-sleep and feel how painful it is to miss my wife all over again on the wakin'-up, the realizin' there's no room for her in this inflatable

raft and how her body was circulatin' and pumpin' all the time but not now. She was not in the least doll-like, but our community was. I thought of them as an army of doll-babies with them clicky eyes shuttin' if you flip 'em upside-down. That's not natural. Recollectin', I stab with the thought that those doll-babies maybe thought I was a doll-baby, never stirrin' up opposition, merely clickin' the eyes. But the consequences of revolutionary plots! The two of us did not circulate our ideas around the town, because we knew it was cold punishment waitin', stuffed in all crevices. The fiery anger and resignation made me so blanketed and tired. Boil'd and embroil'd. And so the trust for each other had been plenty, our own order established. Insular-coincidental.

Fingers still plump and trailin'. Think I'm awake now. The roof of my mouth is parchment against backs of my molars—but I thought the face was wrinkle-parchment? It's hard to know.

The only landscape I want is her hope-body. Hope-stranded hair, hope-ears, hope-mole and hope-cartilage. Hope-follicles, hope-cuticles, hope-retinas, hope-scalp. Hope-forehead, hope-freckles, hope-armpit-fuzz. Hope-fingernails. Hope-arteries and hope-liver. Hope-calves, hope-femurs. Hope-all-insides and her entire hope-body. I could live there.

Do I stare at my hands trailin' over the sides of the inflatable raft? After I sit up, it occurs to me: no piece of land is anything but barren.

The sea has been trying—for days! months? years?—to lick my raft-wounds! The water beads off, resisted. I am a giant, oozing wound! I am open and inflamed. But scabbed in some areas! A diminutive map of scab-countries. What is a destination? I don't think I am sayin' this aloud, but it's certainly loud in my head. It gets old. My wrinkles, wrinkl'n'. It's either rainin' or else the spray from the sea or else fish-spittle is tap-tappin' my shoulders so lightly but consistently and the top of my bald head. I must be such a shape, sittin' up in this orange inflatable raft against the vast sea.

I don't understand anymore. I am exiled from each body: hers, our land, the other lands. The sea, though, has been kind, its flesh generous. It would be like one enormous salt-water-bath (hydrogen, oxygen, hydrogen), or one enormous, cried tear. To cleanse. To exonerate.

My body trails after my trailin' hands, I think. I think I see this happen and believe it's not a dream in some murky sleep. I carry on, sleek. Remember them tricky gods? All of 'em gazin' at me, one-eyed, I feel the hieroglyph for understand emblazoned on my thin-skin, and I bet it matches the sea-floor. An order I'm startin' to understand.