

## The Seal

A tentative knock on the door – rustling, percussive – and when I open it my seal is standing there, looking almost debonair. There's a kind of ballet dancer thing going on with the flippers. Balletic. We stand and admire one another.

Is this yourself? I say.

She answers with what I take to be a nod. But it is the eyes that communicate most strongly. All those times I walked the shore and she followed, suddenly appearing and then disappearing; all those times we couldn't take our eyes off one another.

Come in, come in.

And then, Let me take your coat.

She lifts her shoulders and shimmies out of her skin. It falls at her feet with a sigh. When I pick it up it has a surprising heft and smells of seaweed and more strongly of other things I cannot name. Involuntarily, I brush my hand over it to feel its feral tingle. It isn't uniform in colour, but dappled, piebald. Here and there living things have grown into its weave. In places there are abrasions and gashes made eloquent by healing.

With her coat off, she stands before me in what looks like cream velvet long johns and matching waistcoat, both of which appear to be fused to her body. I step back and direct my visitor to the living room, where I had been sitting watching the dark gradually descend outside. The light is low and blue peat clods smoulder in the fireplace; their slow tongues shape the telling of an old, old story.

She sits down in the baggy armchair and I can see her taking in her surroundings. She is smiling and joyous, as if it is all too wonderful for words. When we first came here, I felt like that also.

Would you like a drink? Whisky?

Again, the eyes and her movements assent. I leave her and come back with a couple of glasses and a bottle. She is looking at the photograph on the dresser, the one of you and me arm in arm before the bitter ripening of the world. I pour the drinks – a moderate measure for her and larger one for me. She has no bother grasping the glass – her ur-flippers are remarkably agile. I can see the delicate articulation of the bones and they are not unlike my own fingers.

I show her the house – my paintings, my few books. We go from room to room. At each juncture she exclaims and laughs, enraptured by the strangeness of it all.

I tell her about myself that evening, a story that becomes also the story of my species, full of betrayal and wilful despoilation. As the long night deepens we sit and finish the whisky between us, although she drinks very little, if truth be told.

Somehow, telling it to her is like an unburdening. There is no judgement in her reaction. She maintains the same sense of amused bemusement throughout, as if I am telling the most astounding novelties and marvels, and she wears an expression of pure delight. She says nothing, of course, and yet she says everything.

But deep down I know that her forgiveness has always been greater than mine.

I say she doesn't speak, but later, in bed, as the night wears on and then wears off, she does start to speak. Of course, I have often heard her singing in the evenings and at night as I lay in my bed cold and alone – wild, beguiling cries. Her speech, too, is strange and subterranean,

but gulpingly mellifluous in its own way. Now it is my turn to listen. She tells me a story I do not understand at first because I try too hard to make stubborn sense of it. It is an even older story than mine, and I hope I will remember it when the time is right.

Then I let her remove my own skin. This is easier than you think. First, she massages me, roughly, tenderly, with a glandular secretion that slicks and sleeks me into readiness. Then she rubs my sole, my pelma, until she finds an overlap and pulls gently upwards. It is like skinning a peach: the difficult bit is removing it all in one piece. That is an art, and one she is skilled at performing. It is strange at first to see your muscles and bones exposed, to see your organs shyly disclose themselves, and skeins and skeins of blood vessels in all their gauzy intricacy. A skin suit is heavier than it looks. She puts it on with scrupulous care, head-first, unrolling it slowly down, down, marvelling at the change wrought to her appearance, uttering little cries of pleasure and astonishment. In places it is wrinkled; in others, her flesh swells it out. The ends of the arms and legs dangle, but I know she will soon grow into them.

Then it is time for us to part, just before the dawn. I lift her coat, grown heavier now, it seems, more pelt than coat, and step into it. It is loose and flappy at first, but she shows me how to shake it into myself, snug and seamless. It tickles but I soon feel warm and safely enclosed in its bulk.

She sees me to the gate. There is no farewell, no leave-taking. These rituals make no sense to either of us; our mutually understood transaction, our skew-whiff covenant, is sufficient.

Then I move towards the sea. Soon I begin to weary and realise I need to get down on all fours and move that way. It is still effortful, but finding a rhythm propels me forward. The sea beckons and soon I am in and floating. I hear sounds, changing sounds: the snapping and pinging of synapses; the shutting down of tiny pistons in the blood and in my head; the

rushing sweep that accompanies the transmigration of thought and soundtracks the clearing of sensations. Then I become aware of the slow increase of something else, accompanied by a distant, pulsing music. I see everything differently: close up, more urgent, analogue. The awareness of peril is now a grainy determinant. I find I can no longer think ahead. Instead, I am intensely aware of the mingled appetites of past and present.

At first I cannot get under the water and bob helplessly; my vestigial thoughts are still too many, too buoyant, my memory-traces still too tenacious. But then the wave comes and with its rise they fall away, like the slow surrender to sleep. Involuntarily, my lungs draw in deep bellowsful of air and I go under. The last thing I see are the lights in the house being extinguished, one by one.