

SEAL WIFE

Amy Parker

Marshall goes crabbing

First and second cognates

plague/pilgrimage

crab/wish

The summer he turned thirty, the only task my husband Marshall could stand was setting nets for crabs off the Santa Cruz pier. The simple hauling and suspense of the enterprise appealed to him — he was far too clumsy and impatient to fish. Crabbing was like casting pennies into a wishing well, only what he wished for actually surfaced when he drew the rope back up.

On his birthday, Marshall left his wooden cabana next to the boarding house he managed and descended into town. He could hear the tubercular barks of the burgeoning sea-lion colony nearby. He took the shortcut by the river, through the tent city where homeless people camped. Sea lions had swum upriver, and they crowded now among the garbage and sleeping bags. They hobnobbed atop the flattened tents and nosed through rags and bicycle parts. A small, dark-eyed female found a bell and stroked it with her nose. It rang — a brittle, shivering sound. The rest of the sea lions fell silent. She rang it again. They all gazed at Marshall. She rang the bell a third time, solemnly, and the nylon tents fluttered. Marshall shouldered his crab hoops and kept on.

Sea lions dozed alongside junkies under the railroad bridge. On the other side of the river, a cluster of pinnipeds obstructed the sidewalks. They left steaming, ropy scat on the thoroughfares. They sunned themselves in the crosswalks, oblivious to pedestrian curses, revved engines, and car-horn blares. At the post office, they preened on the steps, proliferating like junk mail. From the public fountain their gleaming heads rose, snorting and spouting. They hauled themselves over the fountain's lip, they lolled in its spray, combing their ears.

On one corner of the square, a quartet of junior-high boys played homemade marimbas. A gang of sea lions humped toward them, barking and sniffing the air. The boys scattered. Planks splintered and PVC pipes lolloped across manholes, skidding into the street, providing hollow accompaniment to the sea lions' disconsolate cries as they nosed the remains. Marshall, intent on his course, failed to notice a gang of sea lions attacking a sushi pushcart. As he progressed toward the pier, swinging his bag of fish guts and humming apprehensively, the sea lions overturned the cart and sent the vendor running. They ate everything, even the rolling mats.

At the foot of the pier, a group of rubberneckers gave interviews for local TV.

"I've seen some of them cruising the boutiques," remarked one surprised onlooker. "Which is weird, because they don't even wear shoes."

Behind the TV crew, demonstrators waved signs that read "Santa Cruz for the Sea lions!" and "Animals are people too." A spokesperson bullied her way in front of the camera and demanded that the local government erect a shelter and provide aid for the stranded animals.

"They're no different than any other refugees!" she shrilled.

Looking out at the seal-clotted waves, another local remarked, "Unreal, man. They actually outnumber the surfers."

Marshall, preoccupied with his own mortality, paid no attention.

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“Only the deathless believe in death. The thing that peeks out of the eyes, that struggles in its envelope of flesh knows otherwise—”

Ah, hell. The Tinfoil Dude was out today.

“—but the boneheaded body, which believes so little, is firmly convinced by death.”

Marshall set his sack of fish guts on the pier, sighed, and dug into his hip pocket. The Tinfoil Dude adjusted the silver photographer’s umbrella above him, then smiled.

Marshall fished, but the coins in his pocket refused to bite.

“Gimme a break, it’s my birthday,” he said.

The Tinfoil Dude, by way of reply, put on his sunglasses. He had covered one lens with new foil.

The mendicant pelican, Happy Jack, sidled between Marshall’s feet and darted at the bag of innards. A tourist lobbed French fries at the bird, but Happy Jack was no tame opportunist, no voracious and undiscerning seagull. He was still young, a yellow-feathered purist. Happy Jack tore open the bag and dragged out a fish skeleton, which had hooked a roll of intestine, which was in turn tangled up with some rubbery blue organs. Happy Jack whisked it all along behind him like ticker tape. The pigeons and seagulls and cormorants made it a parade.

Marshall chased after the pelican with a half-irritated sense of camaraderie. Tourists, bored with the bobbed backs of sea lions on the beach, stumped after the bird, too, snapping pictures and making the boards shake with their fat city feet. Marshall did his best to ignore them. He had his wish to catch.

More sea lions sheltered under the pier. They looked like large, unappealing women with mustaches, Sicilian perhaps, round and rubber-coated, bowling-pin shaped, with huge liquid eyes, helpless and somehow Catholic, filled with too much soul for Marshall’s taste.

He settled a crab hoop on the pier and cocked an ear to the distant splashes and consumptive barking of the sea lions. They lumoxed into the water, bobbing down and shooting back up. Jesus, there really were a lot of them.

Marshall rummaged in the hefty sack and picked out a ripe, green-headed crappy. He strung stiff yellow twine through a gill, avoiding the baleful glare in the fish’s scuffed eye, and tied its head to the center of his net. He peered down through the crack in the boards, certain the sea lions were watching him. Thirty feet down, in the shadowy water, a pair of eyes met his.

“Stay away from my catch,” he said — adding, since the eyes looked hurt and knowing, “please.”

Before he could lower the net into the water, a flash off the Tinfoil Dude’s semaphore blinded him. The Tinfoil Dude caught up with Marshall and resettled his lawn chair and reflective umbrella next to the bag of bait. The sunlight spattered like hot grease off the crimples in his foil suit. He cocked his head and looked at Marshall through a lone black lens.

“The sea is a sieve, and bottom feeders inherit what lasts long enough to sink. The drowned, the bony, the calcareous, all drift down alongside ingots and amphorae, where crabs dwell. Those bone pickers, those rag and bottle men engage in daily congress with old dreams. Whatever humans wish on and lose and hope to recover; those things they consign to oblivion. The coins and rings, the crumpled cans, syringes, tied-off rubbers — they

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all fall to the crabs. The crabs trim anything essential enough to decompose, and strip wishes to their simple, everlasting bones. What do you wish? The crabs will offer it up to you. What do you wish? Claws relinquish what hands cannot keep.”

Marshall shivered and turned his back. He lowered his first net into the water. A fisherman watched him from a few feet away.

“Fool’s errand. Only a jackass’d go crabbing during a spell like this. The sonsabitches will take your bait before it hits the bottom.”

The fisherman tossed his cigarette into the water, watched it hiss out. A seagull dove for the butt. Marshall looked vaguely at the man, who held his rod and reel across his chest like a bayonet, his shoulders squared for a fight.

“Well, you’re fishing, aren’t you?” Marshall asked mildly.

“Hell no. I’m trying to hook the sonsabitches in the eye.”

Out along the break, a young surfer caught a wave. He sheared back and forth along the glassy curve. A sea lion crested alongside and tried to climb onto his surfboard. She knocked him to his knees, and the wave folded them both under. The young man surfaced, gained his board, and paddled furiously toward the beach. The sea lion followed. She swam placidly but steadily, gaining on him. The surfer ran his board aground, shouldered it, and dashed through the surf toward the high-tide line, then tripped on his leash and fell. She was almost upon him. He scrambled upright and pounded up the steps to the pier, where he collapsed at Marshall’s feet.

Marshall and the fisherman unzipped the prone man’s wetsuit to give him some air. Tattoos covered his upper body.

“Couldn’t shake her, dude. It’s like she’s in heat.” The surfer panted, scrubbed a hand through his hair, and dashed the salt from his eyes. He sat up and looked at the circling sea lions.

“Where are the males?”

The waves were packed like bleachers — tier upon tier of dark-eyed lionesses on the swells.

“Strange times, my man. Strange times,” said the surfer. He considered the sea lions.

“I lived through a plague of caterpillars once, when I was a kid. Big black mothers. Really sick, and I don’t mean in a good way.”

He dislodged a pebble from his great toenail and flicked it into the sea.

“But the butterflies that year were something else.”

More semaphore, and the Tinfoil Dude’s cockeyed black gaze was upon all three of them.

“Humans have souls that show in our eye whites. Our bodies are frail and unpeeled, and yet we are strange shelled beings all the same. Divinity reinforced in flesh. Only the most vicious and primitive — the cold-bloods, the sharks — mistake men for animals, for food, for seals, for themselves. Captive orcas will drown their trainers, but that is war, and they are prisoners. The spermaceti kill men, but only in self-defense, and that is allowed because men (cold-blooded, vicious, and primitive) kill them. But the other creatures know men as terrible angels, mammal-ethereal. Cousins of the cetaceans and pinnipeds. Like birds, we stand upright. Our

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souls, they say, have straightened us. Where wings (or fins, which are only wings for water) should be we have hands. Hands! Those double agents. The soul's other seat."

The Tinfoil Dude picked bits of foil off the lens of his sunglasses and chewed thoughtfully on the pellets until the fisherman gave him a cigarette in hopes of discouraging further transmissions. Marshall edged away. Suddenly even looking at other people required such an effort that he could feel the muscles in his lips start to twitch. Hopefully they thought he was smiling. He fled to the other side of the pier.

The first net came up empty. He moved to the next station and pulled it up, straining to catch sight of crabs beneath the sunlit and shifting water. When the net burst to the surface, it held nothing but the remains of his bait. He came to the last net and stood looking down for a long time, following the line with his eyes. He fingered the twine. It chafed his fingers pleasantly. He adjusted it so it fit into the notch worn into the railing by countless other lines. He reeled it up, hand over hand. The net rose swiftly. He could tell from the weight that he'd caught something. The silver hoop broke the surface, and he saw a nest of crabs, three of them — a decorator, a Sheephead, and a rock crab — scooting along and overlapping one another as they tore contentedly at the fish head. Relief loosened his grip. Beneath the water's surface, a dark, oblong shape skirted the net, turned, swooped, and spread a pair of shadowy wings.

"No, you bitch!"

He hauled. The sea lion's head rose and threw off water. A quick nudge flipped the net. The crabs spiraled down. She threw him a coy look and sped under.

Waves chopped against the pilings. Marshall leaned against the rail and let the net string dangle. Happy Jack gripped his way sideways along the railing toward Marshall. He shook himself, raised his crest, and clapped his bill.

"Get out of here, Happy Jack."

Marshall sighed and dragged up the net. It clung briefly to the skin of the water, dripped and swayed, and left a rippling bull's-eye.

The pelican launched, wheeled once, arrowed into the water, and came up with a fish.

Marshall could hear the sounds of salsa music and laughter from the beach out beyond the empty roller coaster in its drop cloth of mist. It started to rain. Tourists squawked, zipped up their sweatshirts, and herded their kids toward the parking lot. Happy Jack's head appeared and disappeared above the railing, like a gas flame. Marshall brooded over the water, which was still the clear dark green of a wine bottle. The mist pearly down. A small dark head turned liquid eyes up at Marshall, apologetically. He saw something come-hither in her glance. A mute appeal; an invitation. Her nostrils dilated. She snorted once and disappeared.

Some pocketknife-wielding kid had carved a pair of blocky initials into the railing and, lacking the ability to fashion a heart, boxed them in with a square. Marshall traced the letters with a fingernail. He peered down through the tatters of mist, but could see nothing.

Had she *winked* at him?

The leap
Third cognate
suicide/courtship

She surfaced again and combed out her whiskers, beckoning. She executed a neat flip, pointed her toes (flippers? flukes?) at the sky, rolled like a hoop. She came up and offered him her bottomless eyes. She was *flirting* with him. He let the hoop drop. It curveted on the boards and beat to a stop. He smoothed his mustache. He

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looked over his shoulder. The pier behind him was all mist. Even the pelican was gone. He turned back to the water and there she was, swimming steadily toward him, with a smiling wake. Peace lapped at his stomach. He considered the drop. She waited for him, stirring the water with her foreclaws, writing a message on the surface.

Come on in. The water's fine.

Marshall plucked off his sweater and cast it on the pier, heeled his shoes free, stripped his socks, unzipped and shucked and stood with the mist stippling his bare skin. He set an instep to the lower bar of the rail, mounted, and stood, wavering, his arms flapping slightly, above the pier. It was a long drop. She cocked her whiskers at him with the coquetry of woman hiding a half-smile behind a swept fan.

He leaped.

His body knifed the water, and the water winded him. The wound his body made on the skin of the ocean closed instantly and left no scar. He was under, plummeting true. He flipped and kicked down to meet her. Her fur brushed his skin, rough and frigid as she swept the length of him. He reached for her, but she bristled through his fingers, eluding him, like a fish. Another desperate flutter and he caught up with her, hovering over her sleek swimming back. He locked his arms around her neck (her breast?) and scissored his pale legs around her midsection. His whole body felt bone-hard. She was cold, all cold, and surging through the water with powerful lateral strokes. They left long bubble trails in the water. A spike of desire pierced him. As if he could boil the sea to steam.

Marshall lunged at her. He had almost come to the end of his air. She bucked beneath him. He held her, but she began to rise, carrying him. They approached the sea's upper skin. He pressed himself against her. They broke the surface. Delicious shafts of air punched into each lung. His head felt as though it might explode. She was serene, floating beneath him. She ferried him, slung across her back, all the way to shore.

Marshall lay propped on his elbows on a stretch of beach. The pier was faintly visible now. A cow-nosed ray that had washed ashore stirred the sand feebly. He watched its quiet death, feeling sad but oddly contented. He lay back and fanned out his arms, making an angel in the sand. One palm happened upon a piece of sea glass. Still new, and jagged. He gripped it in his fist.

She humped out of the water, dragging her cumbersome body toward him. She passed the dying cow-nosed ray with indifference. She loomed over him. Her gassy breath enveloped him. The sound of the sea enclosed them. He realized, looking at her ears, small and neat like moth antennae, that he had always been lonely. He looked at the trembling fibers of her whiskers, at her liquid eyes, which gazed at him with desire and sympathy. Joy exploded within him. She barked, and as he looked up at the vault of her mouth, at her clutter of teeth, he laughed and reached for her.

The puddle of her former skin

**Fourth cognate
undress/flay**

The sea lion rolled over, her vast belly pearled with grit. He sat up and moved to straddle her, but her sharp, nipping bark checked him. Marshall fell back on his haunches. She lifted her head and looked at him hard, then tucked her muzzle and tore herself open just below the throat. He watched the shaft of her eyetooth ease into the fur. It made a small popping noise as it broke the skin. Blood flowed down. She drove into her throat more deeply, worried and mumbled at the skin, her eyes starting. Her chest heaved, and she beat her bottom flukes against the sand. Marshall's own eyes stung. The sight of his tears seemed to spur her, because she expanded her vast ribs, thrashed her tail, and hitched her jaws down sharply, unzipping the skin. The sound was moist and ragged. Fur and flesh parted, and she hitched again. She fought the layers of hair and fat, sometimes coaxing with her tongue, sometimes gnawing violently, until she had opened a seam from her neck to her sternum.

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Her flukes thrummed a quick tattoo in the depression she had dug while she struggled. She gasped in quick spurts, like a beached fish, and he feared she was drowning in her own blood. But she was barking, or trying to bark. He could hear it now, a soft aspiration of the glottis. She nosed his fist. He pulled back. A stripe of blood on the back of his hand and the chilly spume from her nose.

Marshall opened his palm. She barked again — a horrible, hacking sound. He understood.

He brought his piece of sea glass to her breast, jimmied it into the tear she had made, and gutted her.

There was no spill of intestine. Instead, something white and slippery moved between the lips of the gash. He pried back the folds of seal skin, looking for viscera to pull free, for tendons and ligaments to cut. Something moved inside the skin, distended it, poked through, withdrew. Her lap was so bloody. The head continued its noiseless barking, and something struggled to emerge. Small and pale, it poked through the gape. He grasped it and pulled. It felt wrinkled and delicate, an arch that fit the cup of his hand. He squeezed, it kicked. He had it by the instep. Again he pulled and his hand slid up the sole of the bloody foot and gained an ankle. A pair of legs slid free, oiled with blood and yellowish foam — lipids, or sea curd. The skin opened further, disgorging its contents. Thighs emerged, and when they parted, he saw that it was she.

The sea lion sat up, her navel a goblet of blood. She thrust free of her lower flippers, which crumpled, diminished, on the sand. She raised her upper flukes and pushed her entire head back, as if it were a hood. The sea-lion skull hung down her back, whiskers trembling beneath stretched and vacant sockets. She shrugged off the rest of her hide as casually as a woman divesting herself of an opera cloak. She shot her cuffs and sat, triumphantly naked and blood-streaked, on the puddle of her former skin.

When she discovered her hands
Fifth cognate
hand/soul

Her hands lay in her lap. Blood inked her palms. She stared down at them, her hair hanging and her face inscrutable. She fanned her fingers inward, beginning at the pinky, then flared them back out, testing the muscles and joints. He caged one of her hands, then the other, and their fingers meshed. He could feel her delight at the hook and eye of thumbs, at the flat fit of their cupped palms. She turned his hands over. She stroked him again. Her fingers shook.

He grazed her knuckles and saw goosebumps flash up her arms. Hands socked together, twining and sliding, clasping and twisting. Wrist rested in palm, hands closed around wrists. Fingers collapsed on fingers and gripped (here is the church), fingers tented (here is the steeple), fingers dove and plaited and turned. Padded fingertips rolled like rain, straying down the inner skin of forearms. It came to him that this is what hands were made to do. Digits knit. Pulses kissed. His palms grew slick and still she urged him on, her hands untiring, devouring his. At last, when all his senses drew to a point in his fingers, she released his left hand and set his right hand flat on her neck. Using both hands, she guided it down her vulnerable breastbone, along the line of symmetry, between her ribs, over her navel, and down, until it encountered crisp hair and heat.

She looked at him, pressed his hand, and let go. His third finger didn't pause. It plunged and carved out her last vestige of skin.

And thus were we married
Sixth cognate
her/I

Carved out of follicles, shedding the beast, she joined with him. His soul entered her through his hands. He breached her new (true?) skin with his fingers, groped the channel. His fingers pierced her heart, drove and

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pressed until her own soul stirred, cried out, then cried again. I cannot say if this was pleasure. I had no idea it went so deep.

I drew more soul from his mouth, and he gave without knowing what he had to give. I thought he did. (I thought you knew! I thought you knew what you were doing.)

And last of all, the animal part of him found its seat.

And thus were we married.

Imagine me undivided

Seventh cognate

moon/migration

I was the last of our exodus. I'd gone about it singly; unlike my sisters, I knew better than to frighten the men. Such marriages cannot be bullied. I simply waited in the water, watching men's hands, seeking out the one who would recognize me beneath my skin. I observed their hands, the passes that they made, lowering our food into the water. When one scratched his nose it was a miracle. Another tied a shoe. I felt a yearning so deep for those hands, to be under those hands, that I had to marry. I am translating all this after the fact, because at the time, of course, I neither spoke nor thought. I had muscle-knowing, and scent-knowing, and belly-insight, and instinct, and fear. And, of course, the longing for men's hands, for what they could give and do. Imagine me, then, undivided, muscle and buoyancy and bone.

What was it, why did I hanker for a human husband? I would betray myself if I put it down to dumb curiosity, to the witless drive to investigate oil slicks, to swallow tin, choke on flannisters or mistake balloons and floating bags for jellyfish. It was in truth the sweetest yearning. I bore its clutch inside me like a shark's purse, and one evening as I dove, it hatched. A new creature swam inside me; it fit close like a membrane. It wasn't hunger. It wasn't estrus. A desire to rise to the upper air, to escape the pressure of that skin and the skin of the water around me. It moved me and thousands of my sisters. The barking started with the sickle moon. Call it instinct. We abandoned the colony and arrived in one single-minded surge of longing.

It afflicts some of us — the females only, of course. There exists no love (strange word) between the bulls and us in the hot press of the harem. The turbulent schools of us, herded on the rocks. The cormorants. The ripe piss and fish. It is a kind of innocence, in your tongue. In your way (now mine) of looking at it. We have no word for it at all. Why can't I remember that life as I was? Now that I've put off that skin, I've lost my old inabilities. Who would have thought one could lose a lack, or miss a deficiency?

That world is closed to me.

She almost loses her skin

Eighth cognate

fur (noun)/(untranslatable abstract verb)

When they rolled apart, sweating, Marshall looked up and saw that the mist was beginning to clear. The scrimshaw quality of the light told him it was almost sunset. She lay on the sand, looking up at him. Her eyes were already losing their luminous, animal quality. But the look she gave him was deep. He turned away from it; he felt joyous and disgruntled. He pulled her to her feet.

"I guess you'll have to come home with me."

She stumbled against him. Her legs were not supporting her. Marshall felt a flicker of pride. Her breast brushed his bicep and she looked into him again, with worship. He returned her look, half afraid he might glimpse some lingering shadow of Nothingness, because her eyes, when she'd beckoned from the water, seemed bottomless.

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Instead, he saw his own reflection flicker on the skin of her irises.

“Come on.”

She didn’t budge. She looked over his shoulder with the same intense focus she’d trained on him. He turned and followed her gaze and saw the ocean encroach on her cast-off skin. She gave a small cry, pulled free, and dashed back toward the waterline. She ran awkwardly, the toes of one foot catching the heel of the other; her soles clapped together and she fell. The tide swooped in. She pulled herself forward on her elbows, dragging her legs behind her. In this position she was astonishingly fast. A wave flooded over her abandoned skin, lifted it, and sucked it into the surf. She floundered after it. Another wave cast the skin back, relaying it to a new wave, which drew it further away. She cried again. The skin floated beyond her reach. She thrashed into the water, gained it, clutched it to her chest, and tried to stand.

Marshall saw her go under, and he ran. The brine lashed at his claws, and by the time he reached her all he could see was the billow of skin atop the waves, anchored by the determined grip of her hand. The sea flashed around her narrow wrist. Marshall dove and dragged her up by the hair. With the skin she was twice as heavy, but she would not let go. He carried them both back to shore.

She gasped, coughed, clung to him, clutched the skin that was pressed, clam-like, between them. He guided her back to softer sand. She looked over her shoulder at the crepitating waves, shivered, and tightened her grip on her skin. She dropped to her knees and spread it out. It was drenched and faintly steaming, lapped in old juices. It reminded him of a moldy raincoat. A crab scuttled out of one eyehole. Marshall looked away. She smoothed the skin gently and wrung the water from the empty flippers and cloven flukes. Then she rolled the sodden rug into a tight bundle and gathered it in her arms. She might have been carrying a papoose.

He propelled her inland. They were both still naked, but no one bothered them. A gaggle of sea lions parted on the bridge to let them pass. She strode by them, her legs still unsteady. A sea lion nosed the crack of Marshall’s behind. She barked, and it pulled back. Cars honked. Marshall led her home.

I should have left it to the sea. If I had abandoned it there, I might have entered our marriage absolutely. But stripped of it, I’d felt so cold and insubstantial. No fat, no hair, just a sparseness pulled over an arrangement of bones. When I watched my bloody, abandoned shell unfurl on a wave, I saw for the first time the true shape of my self — the speechless, instinctive part of me; the swimmer, the fisher — torn free and taking its leave. I had shucked it too eagerly, and so I ran — even in panic wondering at the jarring bounce, the novel impact of each foot, the alternating rise and fall of breasts, and the shortness in my chest. When I held it, I felt whole again.

Fur Elise

Ninth cognate

Muzak/music

She had no name, and did not know how to speak. Marshall called her Fur Elise, then explained the pun. She had already learned to shrug. So he produced the tune for her by calling up his credit-card company and having himself put on hold. He pressed the receiver to her ear, and she jumped, at first, at the sea of sounds that broke through. Then the music gathered itself into a melody and cycled, achingly, over and over. She held. Marshall’s wrist began to throb, but he was already too much in love, too puzzled and amused to break the connection for her. He had never in his life encountered anything as strange as this: sitting cupping his phone to the unshelled ear of a naked woman who sat on hold with Visa, rapt and absolutely mute.

Some other things hands can do

Tenth cognate

tears

We put the skin in Marshall’s deep freeze and lived naked off one other for three weeks. I learned about the temple and frigate that is bed. Marshall’s tenants jammed their rent checks under the door, and his machine

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picked up their cries of lost keys and faulty plumbing. Oh why is love the hardest to translate? Is there anything so consuming as the first flush of physical love, which feels, which is, intensely holy? Perhaps there's too much seal in me to tell it clearly. We had three weeks of sexual bliss so deep I mistook it for marriage. It disturbed appetite and sleep. Our souls shot to the surface of our skins and leapt back and forth between us, crackling. And then it just — becalmed. We sat, with sails flat, on the surface of a dull mirror.

I admit part of that was due to me. A soul made the world more bitter, cold, and breathtaking than I expected. After the first flush of wonder wore off, the world slapped me like a wave and wet me through. Marshall couldn't understand it. I suppose he got used to it in childhood. But for me every moment felt like snapping awake — and freshness *hurts*; I was constantly agasp, aghast. I was drowning.

Words from that time: *Kaleidoscope. Churn*. It was a kind of seasickness, a disease of the inner ear — or of that spirit function which corresponds to the inner ear. I never quite regained my balance. My soul slopped within me. I could feel it dashing itself against the cliffs of my body: it spiraled into eddies, moved in tides, rose, fell, climbed the walls, and tried to reach the moon.

“You need to learn tears,” the Tinfoil Dude told me.

“Every human born on this earth learns to cry, first thing. Before they open their eyes, they open their lungs and let fly. Tears come before language. Tears become language — that's all language is — just an elegant form of tears. You'll settle down some if you learn to cry — it's just that your soul's too new, and too big for you — that's what hurts — it's kicking against its confinement. Learn to shed tears — they'll let some of the soul leak out of you, ease the pressure on your valves. Get your husband to teach you tears.”

Tears. Love's glue and love's solvent. Oh, I learned to cry.

The memory of pleasure knits itself closed, like the memory of wounds.

The first time I peed, outdoors, naked in the starlight beneath the redwood tree, he thought it was sexy. But later, when, in my innocence, I chose a corner behind his TV, his whole aspect flashed white, and his anger caught me in the sternum. “STOP!” he yelled, towering above me — but of course I couldn't — and so he grabbed a newspaper, furred it, raised it, dashed it over my head, and beat my face and chest until my skin was a smudged series of headlines. It didn't hurt my body. Between the flash, the swats, the blur of paper, and the confusion, I watched the beautiful curve of his hand.

The color left his face and he let the paper drop. He reached for my chin and pulled me up, but still, I saw he had to suppress his disgust, and he didn't answer my eyes when he explained it all to me in the room where the stainless eel came out of a flat coral wall coughing saltless water. Marshall showed me how and where to do it, how to clean the mess, and he washed the printer's ink from my skin. Although I marveled the whole time at the gentleness and dexterity of his long fingers, it was too late. I'd glimpsed the other things hands can do.

That night he made me sushi with those hands. They were so sure, slicing the fish, a fascination of knives, the blades as fingers, more precise than a tooth. How bright they were, his hands, how strong and bony, directing the silver to slice the flesh. Shaping beds of rice. He fed me by hand that night, too, and I overcame my disgust at the dead food by tasting the tips of his fingers first.

That night I slept beside him, and in my sleep, I slipped. There is the song we sing inside our skins, when we slip over the skin of the rocks and into the skin of the water. It is a song of warm blood in cold water, of darting light and fish, of salt.

Basking; she is basking. The sun brushes tips of my fur; it opens pores and heats blood. My heart beats slowly and steadily, and my breath overlaps with the sea's. Occasional spray lashes up around the rock, but the rock takes most of the wetting, and the water that hits me is so fine it only causes an ear to twitch, brings on a sneeze. Fish blood still lingers on her tongue.

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Turn and slip into the water — its green folds part around (me?) and bear (her?) up. The water pares warmth, languor, heaviness from her as I dive. How strong she is: a circuitry of power and awareness, of decision, reaction, speed, and force. The long muscles of her body propel me forward, down, sideways, and her broad forefins thrust aside the water. She arcs, I twist. We fly. We angle and roll, we make quick turns and darting sallies. I draw her belly along the sea floor and shoot to the surface. We blow two sharp reports from each nostril, expand our lungs, and plunge. A rock cod darts past. She charges after it, dives, and catches it. I had forgotten the stark vitality of a live fish. She bobs, draws air, and leans back on a wave, her flukes treading the water. We are not at all tired. We dive and surface, muscling through the water, light and vigorous and singular and enclosed.

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At the touch of sheets, I awoke. Marshall straightened the bedclothes. His hands gripped the sheet and pulled it taut. He smoothed a stray crease with his knuckle. What a weird naked pink bone. What mean little patches of hair. I kicked off the sheet. The cotton felt too dry, too light. She stood on my funny little feet and went to draw a bath.

The cold-water faucet stuck and I couldn't turn it. I wrenched a tendon in my hand, struggling with the tap. She didn't want to sleep in hot water. Ugh. I pulled the plug and stood under the shower. But she couldn't sleep standing up.

*

In this dream, I walk naked out of the house, along the highway, over the bridge, and down to the shore, to lie on the rocks as I used to. But the rocks are sharp, and the air is cold, and I have no fellows.

*

Night/day. Dream/wake. Woman/man. A world stitched from opposing skins.

*

In this dream, I am standing on the beach. The sea throws a cold mantilla about my ankles. The tide goes out, bare stretches of sand gleam. My footprints fill with water, the heels sink, the arches recede. The ocean reads, then smoothes over, our passing. That house, and that woman's body, and her husband, lie in the distance behind us, but here, at the edge, they are impossible to believe in. The sea unearths trivia and casts it at our feet, and suddenly the smallest stone, wet, looks promising, and a sand dollar, half broken or buried, seems a coin we can thumb into the slot of — what?

Only here, at the boundary between water and land, do I feel the possibility of wholeness. Least confusing of refuges, this beach, with its contradictions. Here at the tide line. This is our first and last home. Where it begins and ends differs with the tides; this narrow strip of country shifts constantly, and the sea itself (fertile, sterile, salty) threatens to both claim and withdraw from me, take me or leave her, as it takes, and trades, and leaves the wrack of empty shells, of dead and dying things.

It hands me a bottle. Or rather, casts one at her feet. A green one, long-necked and hippy. I upend it and tip out the thread of gray silt and fumble with a forefinger in its throat and take out a letter that's thick and wet and sticks to itself, a letter that shreds into tears when I try to unpeel it. What is written there matters terribly. But I remember, waking, that she can't read.

*

In this dream, she is back in the colony, surrounded by her kind. It is raining, and her fur sheds the rain. They press together for warmth. Against every part of her own skin, I feel another pulse beat.

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She wakes and finds my breasts unaccountable.

*

In this dream, she is diving under the docks. In the shadow beneath the pier, the water is colder but calmer. A current thrills along her body, and I outstrip the falling crab net easily, plunder it and swim away, up and out of the water, looking over her shoulder at the bipeds that shake their fists and bark in their feeble way.

*

Marshall shook me awake. (She turns in the water and surfaces.)

“I was scared,” he said. “You weren’t breathing.”

“It’s morning. Take us to the beach.”

*

Her heart beat and I bounced from foot to foot while he shouldered our towel and checked the locks. My palms and armpits were damp, and I felt all her muscles gathered and ready, felt her inhabiting this foreign body. We could taste the ocean.

In the car I closed my eyes and called up the flex of her spine through the water. We sprang out of the car before Marshall could pull the parking brake, tearing off my clothes and turning them into kites that the wind cast onto the footpath. *Mommy that lady was naked!*

We sprinted toward the ocean and it was good, that first sight of the water. The waves ran high. They beat the surf to thick cream. I stumbled, laughing, through the foam; she barked and we dove under a breaker.

A terrible burning flooded my chest and lit up my brain, seizing her with confusion. She had expected to be sealed, water-tight, but the liquid invaded our skin, filled our mouth and nose, drenched our hair, licked our eyes, and seeped up high between our legs. The wave tumbled me and she tried to dive under it, but this body would not obey her. Instead of pulsing steadily, my legs thrashed, and her foreflippers pawed feebly at the wave; the wave flooded between my fingers, then brushed them aside, and she couldn’t move forward at all. She struggled, and the wave threw us to the bottom and ground us against the sand. She fought to float and I to stand, but the wave insisted. Although she could hold her breath, my lungs wouldn’t expand. She inhaled a wave and (oh, like knives) more waves (she cleared them so easily) dragged her down. I collapsed, but she, stronger, gave one last surge. She beat her flukes inside my feet. But had forgotten how to swim.

On the beach where we were married, Marshall blew into my mouth and kindled himself in me once more. I lay listless in his arms with my face turned away from the water, looking up at the sandstone cliffs, at the young fossils embedded there. Clams, mostly, their living meat caramelized to cold yellow crystal. The rock beneath me cased old bones. I traced them with my hand, the phalanges of the fins of my ancestors. Along the cliff above me, a green-lined shore crab sat in the stone concavity of a fossil clam. Thrown there by a storm, the crab crouched, legs drawn up, eyes revolving, taking in the lap of bones, the distant sea, its native country, my husband, me. Strange kernel, this castaway in its multiple casks of shell and stone and cliff. It sat, too wise or too small or too stupid to feel otherwise than at home.

When I felt she could walk, we headed for the car.

We almost stepped on the dead cow-nosed ray. Half-rotten, half-mummified, humming with flies, it lay above the high-tide line, among the cast-off skins of condoms shrunken in the weeds. The ray’s tail had shriveled to a turtle-stub, and its tear-thin skin had sunk over its gills, giving it a strange, sealed-off smile. The cartilage around its wings had gone soft. It was the color of road dust, dried up and ripening but still beautiful.

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“Oh, Marshall.”

He detected a smell and wanted to move on. I squatted next to the ray and inspected the fruit-peel skin that had drawn back from the creature’s head.

“Don’t touch it honey, it’s dead.”

But she reached out to move it, and he could tell she’d need help. It was big, five feet from wing to wing.

“Don’t touch it, Lise.”

She picked at one edge and turned it. The death-smell blared — a more-than-fish smell. She gasped as they beheld the insouciant maggots at their feast.

Now she was crying, really crying (Elise, who never cried, who didn’t know how), saying Marshall please, please. We can’t just leave it, please, help me.

He wrapped it in their towel, averting his face, then jogged the dead ray down to the water. He dumped it on an incoming wave.

The waves carried the ray out. Water licked the animal so it gleamed, and the waves lifted its wings. It tumbled in the breakers, flashing its white belly. The surf returned it again and again to the beach. Marshall dragged the ray out further, but it kept coming back. Finally, he swam it into the deep water, where the waves closed over it, and it sank.

Marshall and I didn’t talk on the way home. My whole body itched with caked salt; my lungs felt scoured. I was colder than I had ever been. And the need to get to my skin, to feel it, to handle it with my naked hands, shook me.

Her skin came between them

Eleventh cognate

rot/comfort

When they arrived home, she marched to the deep freeze and pulled out the package of foil. She picked it free and shook the frost out of the old thing and held it to herself, stroking it and smelling it and singing.

She let it defrost and brought it into his bed. It stank of wet compost, and then of a rendering plant. The skin buzzed with sand flies and sea lice. At first clammy and placental, it grew tacky and stiff. The sawed edges where they’d parted it cured into sharp points that scratched him in the night. The bloody inner membrane dried black and flaked off, revealing nasty jaundiced buckskin beneath. Each morning he found flecks clinging to his skin. The shafts that held the claws loosened their grip, dried up and drew back. And the claws themselves, brittle keratin, began to break down. The crease of his sheets collected splinters, and curved quills embedded themselves in the sleepers’ unprotected skin. He would awaken to find one of his fingers protruding from her former nostril, and once (he shuddered at this), his indiscriminating penis inserted itself, during a nocturnal reverie, into a vacant eye socket.

She trailed the skin behind her like some freakish transitional object. It became baubled with growths — buboes of chewing gum, tar, wax, and something unidentifiable and sticky (varnish? semen? sap?). It left damp patches on the sheets. Its soft bits got softer, and its hair seemed to grow. It provided all of death’s textures: the coarse, the spongy, the rank, the friable, the dry, the powdery, the black.

He left the bed.

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I missed him. I did. If I could have, I would have clawed an opening in him and put him on like a second skin. I wanted so badly to inhabit him.

He left the bed, and I was cold, colder than ever, and he was sealed off from me.

I grew fearful for my skin. What was there left to put on?

*

He found her trying to refasten the torn belly. She closed and reclosed it stupidly.

“Stop this. You stink. This stinks. Take off that goddamn thing.”

The head no longer fit her snugly. The eye sockets gaped over her cheeks; he felt discomfited, addressing those drooping, blank patches of skin.

“I can’t even see your eyes, Lise.”

He swallowed hard and steeled himself to adjust the head. The muzzle sagged onto her chest. Its upper lip snagged an eyetooth. He noticed the gums were turning black, and the teeth looked dead. When he adjusted the head, the sea lion’s tongue fell over his hand. It felt like very old flypaper. He looked into her eyes. Against the stiff fur they stood out, moist and healthy, with pale blue whites.

“Let me get this off you. You can’t breathe in that thing.”

She hugged the skin more closely.

He abandoned tenderness.

She didn’t respond.

Took it up again.

Nothing.

He braced himself and then, as a last resort:

“I love you.”

The head slipped down and lolled to one side. A tuft of her hair poked through an eye socket. The snagged mouth curled a derisive lip.

“You have to choose. Right now. Me, or the skin.”

The sea lion shook her head.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Me? Or it?”

She said nothing.

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His hands pressed mine, then ground the bones together. I felt how strong his hands were. They knew so many things I might prefer not to learn. He crushed my hands between his, but the skin kept away the pain. I filled my sinuses with my sweet smell, the smell of my skin. I rolled it over my taste buds and drew it into my lungs. His fingers squeezed mine with sharp impatient pulses: press, release, press, release. It began to hurt. I ignored it. And then the pressure left, his hands left, and I heard him brush them together in disgust. Then I heard them rummage through a drawer. A rustle of plastic, and his footsteps, advancing.

He slipped one blade of the scissor into her left socket and brought the shears together. Half of the face fell down onto her shoulder. He hewed through the second eyehole. Her other head emerged, eyes utterly black and astounded. She saw that he was crying. He grasped the halves of her head in his fists and tore them apart. He stuffed the rotten rags of flesh and fur into a garbage bag. She beat at him, but her hands had no effect on his. He went on tearing her skin into strips. He broke her jaw over his knee and tossed the tinkling bone and teeth into the bag. He ripped the skin from her shoulders and bared her chest. His nails scored the flesh, and he plucked and picked and pulled, and the blood matted under his nails and he shredded her skin into gobbets, stripped the mitts from her hands. As she bent over to save the scraps, he attacked the hide on her back and stripped her down to her bottom fins. She held a last large piece in her fists. He tore it from her, and she was left with a slick tag in either hand. He shoveled the last of the skin with a dustpan and dumped it in the bag.

*

I stood at the railing of the pier and watched him tie my skin to his crab hoops. A crowd of dark-eyed women and their husbands gathered around us. The women nodded at me and steered their husbands away. The husbands looked over their shoulders at us, their eyes eager and bright.

Marshall drowned the hoops of my skin and drew up crab after crab. He put them in a wicker basket lined with seaweed.

“Dinner,” he said.

“Now open your hands.”

“No.”

“Open your hands.”

He pried away the last two pieces of my skin and flung them out, hard and high over the water. One piece fell to the bobbing gulls. Happy Jack caught the other and bore it away.

My husband took my face between his hands, and I could smell myself on him.

“Lise, now you have to stay with me.”

His hands felt how she, inside my skin, turned away from him.

His eyes were red, and wet, and pleading. But his hands knew.

What could I do? I took his hand.

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**The seal wife, having dismantled her skin
Twelfth cognate
together**

We sat alone on the beach, our hands spread out on the sand beside one another, not touching. We sat together, quite alone. People do not herd. Even in groups they remain upright and isolated. Something about their (our) bipedal symmetry suggests it: marked stanchions of loneliness.

The sand pressed my feet comfortably. I burrowed in past the ankles. A line of pelicans dipped low and skimmed the surface of the water, as though ironing it with their flight. I watched the dorsal drift of a sail as it passed the point. There must have been people on board, sunning, watching the water, yet at that distance the boat was just another solitary creature making its way.

How would it be to simply sit and let the tide come in around me? One wave broke like a woman winding curlers; another opened out in a fan. Some swirled, a sidewise fleeing of individual channels; some drew straight lines of retreat. Others met on the bias, a careless film, a cast, a drag. Taken all together, a great cold shrug of sea. A surfer emerged from the ocean and flicked the water from his tattoos. He joined his group of sunburned buddies where they'd pitched camp beneath the rock wall. They were stoned and full of the air and the sea, sore-muscled from bracing their boards, cutting through waves, riding them sweetly in to shore.

"Two blondes were on opposite banks of a river," I heard one say.

"The first blonde yells to the second blonde, 'How do you get to the other side?' The second blonde hollers back, 'You *are* on the other side!'"

An explosive chorus of barks, resonant, overlapping. It sounded so strongly of grief that my own chest swelled in sympathy, my throat opened, my glottis vibrated. The human in me heard sorrow, but the other remembered how it felt to make that sound with her fellows, and had no memory of grieving.

The seal wife, having lost her skin, looked toward the rocks, where the remains of her colony pressed together, basking, chewing fleas, arching their backs with their noses to the sun. She remembered that wet-dog press of haunch and shoulder, the way touch defined their borders and yet connected the close-crowded bodies of her former colony — how it was to be a center in a crowd of centers.

I miss the comforts of pressure. My body's is the loneliness of a body released — the too-light freedom of the air. Now I am a floating element, unmarked by the press of rock, or belly, or fellows' hind feet. I even miss the colder, absolute pressure of the sea. I swam in that vast and singular tear without knowing it, inhabited the soul of the world, which was better, far more free and painless, than having a soul inhabit me and express itself in drops, tiny and sterile, in which nothing swims but salt.

Amy Parker is starting her second year in Fiction at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she is a Teaching Writing Fellow.