

Introduction: Waves

Paula Guran



If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.—Loren Eiseley

Life on Earth began deep in the ocean and water remains the primary element needed to support that life.

We cherish water, but we also fear it—and for good reason: it can be unpredictable and dangerous as well as serene and beneficial. Our ancestors believed deities and spirits ruled the seas, the rivers, even the rain, lakes, springs, and wells. Appease the divine and, perhaps, you would be protected from the many aqueous perils . . . or not.

Powerful and incomprehensible, the oceans were thought to be the home of many monstrous creatures—sea serpents and dragons; the Norse Kraken, Greek Charybdis, Japanese Isonade, Biblical Leviathan. Rivers have monsters, too, like the Yacumama of the Amazon River or the malevolent zin, who live in the Niger River. As for lakes, even if you’ve never heard of the Welsh afanc, you know the Scottish Loch Ness monster.

The waters of the world were also believed to contain mythological creatures whose behaviors were as inconstant as our feelings about the mysteries of the deep. As Jane Yolen has said, “It is the allure of the beautiful, unattainable, mysterious Other. In every culture in every clime, there are stories of such creatures in the oceans, rivers, ponds, wells. Water is such a mutable, magical substance itself, the human imagination simply cannot believe it’s not peopled as the earth is. We want there to be such underwater civilizations and—not finding them—we invent them and then turn around and believe in our own invention.”

Tales have been told since ancient times of marine beings who were tricksters, brought misfortune, or lured humans to certain death. Some had wondrous voices, but to hear their enchanting songs or charmed speech could be fatal. Yet in other stories they were said to save sailors from drowning, grant wishes, or bestow treasure.

Even if their actions were disastrous for humans, merfolk seem amoral rather than evil. Since they are not human, why should they even comprehend our ideas of ethicality? Humans who understand such standards, often ignore them—especially when it comes to their conduct with mermaids, selkies, and others.

The seas were supposedly home for, among others, mermaids, mermen—usually, but not always, half human and half piscine—sirens, the Nereids, and selkies. Other fantastic beings—like kelpies, naiads, morgens, rusalki, the Lorelei, the Nix, the Undine—were various nymphs, spirits, and shapechangers who inhabited rivers and lakes.

What is surely the best-known mermaid story, “Den lille havfrue” (“The Little Mermaid”), was written in 1836 by the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen. Published in 1837 in Denmark, it was translated into English by H. P. Paull in 1872. Despite its emphasis on Christian morality, pain and suffering, an unhappy ending, and a conclusion *intended* to frighten children, most of us seem to forget those aspects and remember it differently: the mermaid sacrifices her voice to persist in following her true love, who she marries and lives with (we assume) happily ever after.

Maybe we read or heard bowdlerized versions, but many of us were thus impressed—unless we read or re-read the original Andersen story. When Disney’s animated *The Little Mermaid* came along in 1989, we were happy to accept Ariel, a rebellious and determined heroine who was, perhaps, not as independent as one might hope, but still no passive princess.

Earlier in the twentieth century, science fiction provided us with a new type of marine being: humans physically modified to breathe under water. And, skating somewhere between fantasy and science fiction, new concepts of undersea-living people—either related to humans or from a different genetic family altogether—arose. Human science has learned a great deal about the oceans, but we still have much to learn; there is still plenty of room to speculate.

And don’t forget DC’s comic-book superhero Aquaman. Since his creation in 1941, the character has had a wide range of incarnations and storylines, but his basic powers include the ability to live in the ocean depths, communicate with sea creatures, and swim at extremely high speed.

This anthology doesn’t offer any of Aquaman’s adventures or, for that matter, any finned red-haired teenagers wearing seashell bras. But it does present twenty-two wonderful fantasy and science-fiction stories involving many variations of merfolk. If there is any unifying theme beyond that, it may be transformation. Water is, after all, constantly changing.

Paula Guran



Swell

Elizabeth Bear



Of course you notice the blind girl.

After you've packed up the merchandise table and started clearing the stage, she lingers, beached with small white hands wrapping the edges of her little café table like bits of seaweed dried there. She clings to scarred black wood as if something might sweep her adrift and drown her.

The crowd breaks and washes around her, flowing toward the door. The wrist loop of her white cane pokes over the back of her chair like a maritime signal flag, in case you somehow missed the opacity of her face-wrapping black shades in the near-dark of the club. And still she remains, a Calypso on her tiny island, while you coil patch cables and slide your warm mahogany fiddle into its case, while the café staff lift chairs onto tables and bring the house lights up glaringly bright, until you start to wonder if whoever she's waiting for is coming to assist her.

The tall redheaded bartender polishes glasses, her apron tossed over the Sam Adams Boston Lager draft handle. Up in the crude timber-built mezzanine, institutional stoneware makes flat clicking sounds and sticky food smells as someone piles it into a washtub. Your sweat's turned cold with the stage lights off, and your flat shoes reek of spilled beer. You're just packing the fiddle pickup into its hand-cut foam when you see Little Eddie the house manager (*little* to keep him straight from *Big* Eddie, the redheaded bartender) come through the kitchen doors and notice the blind girl.

He starts forward, turning sideways to miss skinny dreadlocked Clara as she pauses with the washtub full of plates, but you set the pickup on the closed fiddle case and hop off the riser so you can get to her first. Nobody needs Little Eddie at the end of a bad night. You've had enough bad nights here to know.

He sees you coming and lets his steps go purposeless, turning to stack the glasses on the worst table in the joint—behind the pillar, next to the kitchen—so he can keep a hairy eyeball on you. You come over to the blind girl's table, careful to make some noise, and stop four feet from her.

"Miss, do you need some help?"

She doesn't lift her chin to seek your voice, which makes you think she's been blind since birth. She does tilt her head, however, a vertical crease appearing on her brow.

"You're the singer," she says. She sounds like the cold outside has gotten into her sinuses, her voice rough as if its nap caught on a sandpaper throat. "Has everyone gone home, then? I like to wait for the crowds to clear."

When she lets go of the table-edge, you can imagine you hear her flesh peel free of the wood. It wobbles as she releases it, rocking back and forth on crooked coaster feet for a moment before settling down with a little list to the left. House left. Her left. Your right.

"Everybody's gone," you say. "We're closing up. Do you have somebody to help you get home?"

"Oh," she says, "I can manage."

She's plain, with bland colorless hair to go with the transparent skin, but even stuffy and hoarse, her voice lifts the fine hairs on your nape like a breath.

Dubiously, you glance at the light jacket draping her chair, the summerweight, girl-cut T-shirt stretched over her bony shoulders. Even more dubiously, you glance at the door. Each time it opens, the cold washes into the café. Each time, it takes two seconds for the cold to cross the open floor and curdle on your skin.

Of course, she can't read your body language. So you clear your throat and say, "You know it's January out there."

"I know my way home." As if to prove her point, she stands and gathers her red-tipped cane and jacket. She starts working her way into the latter one sleeve at a time, but the cane gets in her way. You'd offer to take it, but there's no way to catch her eye.

"Sure," you say. "But I can drop you. I'm parked out back."

"You want me to get into a car with a stranger?"

You laugh. "What's going to happen?"

"Sometimes serial killers have women who find victims for them," she says, and you'd think she was totally sincere if the corner of her mouth wasn't turning upward just a little.

“You can call home before we leave and tell them I’m bringing you. And everybody here will see us leave together.”

She’s on the hook, but it’s not set yet. She chews the inside of her cheek.

“I’ll even warm the car up before I bring it around,” you promise, and just like that she says, “Okay.”

She moves toward you, cane swinging, and you stand aside. She taps expertly towards the door. You follow her from the music hall, thinking that it’s weird that after all that she didn’t give you a chance to go and fetch the car. She’s still going to have to wait while you load your gear.

One nice thing about a blind girl: you don’t have to be embarrassed by the un-vacuumed state of your ride. Or the fact that it’s a Corolla with a quarter million touring miles on it. It used to be red about six years ago.

You know you shouldn’t ask her, but who can resist? After she gives you directions you ask, “So how did you like the show?”

Her silence is enough warning to brace yourself for honesty. But then what she says is thoughtful, and not as bad as you were expecting. “You still sound like everybody else,” she says. “But that won’t be forever. You’ll find your voice.”

You nod, and realize again that she can’t see you. You know you’re generic. Everybody starts off generic. All garage bands sound the same, as a girl you used to know liked to say. So you’re generic. But you’re still growing. It’s a slow, painful process, though, and there’s always the fear you’ll die before you finish.

Evolution is the most awful god of all.

“That stuff you sing about,” she said. “You really believe it?”

“I believe it’s important to say it out loud,” you say, because you have to say something. She makes a little noise of consideration or disapproval, like a thumped violin, and you’re afraid to ask which.

You can’t really talk, so you just reach across the center console and touch the back of her hand, lightly, with two fingers. The side road whirs by under the Toyota’s wheels, the verges studded with bare trees burnt-bone stark against dirty snow. The blind girl’s not wearing any gloves. You don’t think she had any. Her hand is cold.

Cold flesh, not the surface cold of human chill with the sense of warmth under it, but cold to the bone.

“You must be freezing!”