

Naiad

Dan A. Cardoza

Seattle's scales appear silver at sunrise, as reflected in the shoals of east-facing high rise windows, all seamless aquamarine before the high tide of noon. She's a perfect Cascadian mermaid, complete with fins and gills. She can't breathe without her fucking rain.

The barnacled homeless that camp at Gastown know this too well. By default, they cling to the cold of her concrete underbelly in makeshift sanctums, as tourists throw money like fish at the Pike's Place Market, salmon, mackerel, and squid. After, they frequent boardwalk boutique shops, organic fruit stands, and bakeries. Stand in lines just to take their coffee at the original Starbucks, under the 1971 vintage Naiad sign.

Nessa felt more comfortable, at the shoreline, away from the tourists, lending a helping hand to the needy. In doing so, in giving, she began to believe and trust again, especially in herself. It hadn't taken long to feel the salve of relief from the drowning sensation caused by the carefully helpful, controlling men in her life.

The tide pulled Nessa here from Austin, away from her monotonous sunshine. She and Baleen's stories were similar, except Baleen escaped the sameness of Tallahassee, Florida, with only the skin on his back. He took a job shucking oysters for restaurants along Western Avenue. Nessa was a server at a high-end seafood restaurant. A \$10.00 tip from Nessa was just what was needed to get them acquainted, in bed.

Over early morning gentrified coffee they'd often converse.

"I keep dreaming of something T.S. Elliot wrote, 'I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me.' The aftermath feelings are beginning to haunt me, make me melancholic." Nessa's expression grew wounded as she spoke. She fought back the tears that welled in her eyes.

"Haunted? Come to think of it, you do look sad," says Baleen.

"I'm saving my money for community college, in Northern California or Southern Oregon. I'm getting tired of serving tables and pretending to be happy for tips," she says.

Baleen replies, "Try my job, general labor, swoop and scoop, the sort of work anyone with an empty oyster shell of a mind can do."

Nessa responds, "I've concluded that depression is not fashionable after all, even if it's Seattle's signature brand of seasonal disorder." She pauses. "I'm one millennial who's checking out of the movement, a generation that's not a good fit for my aspirations, a future with the potential of promise."

“Movement? Aspirations?” Baleen inquires. His eyes befuddle in disbelief.

Nessa having given it some thought continues, “Yes we agree, a murky and clumsy future created by the greed of generations that have gone before us. But a future I won’t visualize as empty of hope, as do many of our contemporaries.”

“What future?” Baleen cynically asks, recalling the discomfort and stink of his Occupy Wall Street tent. He’d come to accept what he’d learned in preparation of a life of chaotic minimalism.

“My future—our future, there, I said it, it’s out there.” Baleen stares at his shoes and waits for an answer. But it doesn’t come. Then he looks up, shaking his head like a mime saying no.

“Baleen, I feel like there is a someday out there, one I should explore, a time, space, where choices exist, a place where tomorrows allow me to go. If I don’t leave Seattle soon, I think I might drown.”

“I’ll love you until you go, as best I can. But I will not follow,” he mutters as if underwater.

Nessa didn’t need the permission of Poseidon or any other God or man to depart. The day arrived by default, and she vanished aboard a Greyhound bus. In her life raft, she fought back the swollen tears of rejection. Nessa struggled to forget the beautiful glass hills and the argent valleys of Seattle. She drifted over Occidental, and Stadium Place, in a riptide. And then she skimmed the undulations through 4th Avenue and Bush, cresting and descending cleanout to the onramp of Interstate 5.

She felt as though she and her mermaid city were inhaling and exhaling, breathing as unison. As she went south, she relented and looked over her shoulder one last time. The sun was setting. It was a golden bowl of fiery spun straw, against the near dark. Nessa imagined her colossus finned city sloughing down the hills west, toward the Bay of Puget Sound, then into the salty water, out to sea, gone forever.

Nessa will never forget the viscosity and darkness of the open water and how effortlessly it swallowed the descending light. Or how smoothly Seattle’s oscillating caudal and dorsal fins hastened her glissade over the rim of the old world’s perfect cartography.

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