

Rain. Water. All stories begin with it in some way. It nourishes us, cleans us, keeps us alive. It is the mother of all things. All things come from it. All things return to it, in time. This is a story about the ocean when it was younger, kinder, less poisoned by man.

It was a bright sunny day at the coast. The gulls were singing, the water softly nibbling away at the land. It was a slow, quiet day. On this day, a particularly adventurous and curious young boy was exploring some caves near the ocean. He knew he could do so now, for his parents worked in the lighthouse deep into the night and resigned to the arms of Morpheus until the following eve. They had always wanted to become fishermen, enraptured by the hooks and nets.

They had told the boy to stay away from the caves. They said he could drown from the tide coming in too fast. The boy remembered this but thought it foolish of his parents for he had explored them in secret many times before. "*Why are they so afraid?*" He thought to himself. "*There's nothing wrong with these caves.*"

He was in a particularly deep cave on this hot, sunny day; one that had seemed to call to him like an old friend. He had almost thought he saw arms beckoning him from within. Like smoke in the wind, there for only a fleeting moment, then wiped away, forgotten like a fleeting thought. As he continued to delve further and further within, he began to hear a song, sung by a soft, sorrowful voice. Bittersweet and mournful, yet laced with a sliver of hope. He followed it further and further, seemingly into the very bowels of the earth. He finally reached a cavern, impressive in its size, a cavity seemingly wrought from toils of Atlas himself. One could have fit dozens of horses within and many more men.

As he entered this area, lit by some ethereal glow, he heard the sweet voice once more, louder this time. Closer.

*Hear the call of the sea once more
As it rolls from shore to shore
It's said if one returns the call
The wind will always blow them to shore
The sea it is a fickle thing
It's love a blessing true
But if you ever wrong the sea
That day you'll always rue
The waters will boil, the air will charge
With cold and hateful lightning
And you will see a great display
The bravest find quite frightening
The sea will grasp you from beneath
As the sky shoves from above
And thus you'll be dragged ere' below
Away from all you love*

As the voice faded and echoed within that cavern the boy searched for the source desperately, longingly. He had never heard a melody so beautiful, so haunting. He fumbled within that chamber for what seemed like hours, calling out frantically to anyone that may rest

within the cave. He shouted until his throat became hoarse, damp with blood. As he gave one final, desperate cry, a stone fell from above and cracked against his head with a wet thud.

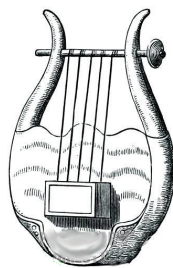
When he awoke he found that he had been returned to the mouth of the cave. His wounds had been covered with a stinky green salve that he dared not touch. As he slowly surveyed his blurry surroundings he noticed that no time had passed; the sun was at the same place it had been when he had entered the cave. The boy became very afraid, for he noticed that even though no time had passed, the water had risen considerably since he had gone in. It lapped playfully at his stomach, almost caressing him; wrapping itself around him and dragging him further ashore. He lay there for a long time watching the day go by, the water stroking his body lovingly.

As time passed he noticed the water begin to recede back to its home. He followed it longingly, reaching out for its cold embrace. As he crawled towards the sea he saw a shape begin to take form from within the water. It flowed and bubbled into a short woman; her hair was seaweed, her eyes pearls, wearing a necklace of clams. He had never seen anything so beautiful. He was entranced.

"Was it you that saved me? Was it your haunting voice I heard from within the bowels of that cave?" She offered no answer, and caressed his cheek with her hand. "Are you a god?" whispered. The woman of water kissed him on the forehead and gently shoved him towards land. The boy did not want to go. "Can you at least tell me your name?" She opened her mouth and from within came the same soft, sad, beautiful voice he had heard from the caves.

"Croí an Aigéin."

As she said this she gave to him a lyre carved from the bones of a whale, beautifully polished. It was still slick from the waves and gave off a peculiar glow, like some sort of energy emanated from within.



"Seinn amhrán na farraige agus fillfidh mé ar ais chugat."

He had never heard a language like this before. It was very intricate and sounded very ancient. The way the words flowed together was astounding to him, very guttural in nature.

"Your language is very beautiful, but I can't understand it. Do you know my words?" The woman seemed to purse her lips in mild annoyance.

"Play the song of the sea and I'll return to you."

The woman then kissed his forehead with a longing sigh. By the time all of this had transpired the full moon had risen into the sky, its rays dancing beautifully through the woman's translucent, mercurial skin. The woman backed away from the boy and returned to the sea. Big, tenebrous clouds quickly obscured the light of the moon as icy rain began to stab the boy's skin. Swiftly he ran, climbing the large rocks between his home and the beach. He sprinted past the ferns, the alders, the oaks towering above him. He could smell fish stew and freshly baked bread; the smell of home. And for once, he welcomed it wholly.

Many years passed, and as time went on, the woman began to think that the boy had forgotten about her and her gift to him. And, in truth, he did not think on it often. He hadn't forgotten it, just as one never forgets their first love, but it had faded in his mind. He had aged, becoming a strong, hardworking man. He worked in the lighthouse just as his parents had before him. When he took on their labors, they decided to take up fishing. They would go at night, when the other fisherman and sailors had gone to shore and curled in their beds.

On one such night the sea was in a bad mood. Its water boiled and rain pelted down from above. Despite all this, and the son's attempts at protest, his parents had decided to go down once again. So the man went up to the lighthouse and beseeched whatever gods could hear him to return his parents unharmed.

At that moment something caught his eye from within the room: the lyre the woman had given him. He remembered her song and her promise and grasped the lyre desperately. He had not touched the lyre since he was a boy, and feared he would not remember how to play it. But as it lay in his arms, the sounds around him began to fade beneath the sound of the violent sea. Then he heard it: the voice of the woman, soft and ancient, her strange language caressing his heart like an old friend. And so, he began to play and sing with her:

*"Éisteacht leis an gloch na farraige arís,
Mar rollaí sé ón gcósta a gcladach,
Tá sé sin má tuairisceáin ceann an gloch,
Beidh an ghaoth buille i gcónaí iad a gcladach,
An fharraige, is é an rud fickle,
Tá sé breá a blessing fíor,
Ach má tá tú mícheart riamh an fharraige,
An lá a bheidh tú ag rue gcónaí,
Na huisci Beidh boil, beidh an t-aer in aisce,
Le lightning fuar agus hateful,
Agus beidh tú a fheiceáil ar taispeáint iontach,
An bravest fháil go leor scanrúil,
Beidh an fharraige tuiscint agat ó faoi bhun,
De réir mar shoves spéir ó thuas,
Agus dá bhri sin beidh tú a bheith dragged ere 'thíos,*

Ar shiúl ó na grá agat."

As he sang he saw the wind begin to change. The clouds began to spiral around the lighthouse as the waves grew more violent. Water droplets flew through the sky like needles, obscuring the man's vision as he looked for some sign that his parents had reached the shore. He could see nothing through the quilt of deep blue night and white silvery storm. He called out to the woman...

"Please spare my parents! I do not know what they have done to anger you so, but if you let them leave your waters safely I will replace them for you. What say you, *Croí an Aigéin?*" At first, it seemed as though his words had gotten lost amongst the storms' shrill screams, but he began to notice a sweeter tone to the wind; it began to fade into a soft breeze. The clouds parted and the moon's light shone solely on his parents' ship. The water was now completely still; nothing stirred until one instantaneous smooth wave carried the ship softly to the shore.

The man ran from the lighthouse to the shore with the speed and desperation he had once had as a boy. When he finally reached the boat, it was pristine, untouched. It was in better condition than when it had gone out: the faded paint looked new and glossy, the boards freshly lacquered, the mended sails pristine.

"Thank god! You're ok! I thought you might have drowned!" The man yelled. His parents came to him, enveloped him in a warm embrace, and fell to the ground and lay still. "What is this, *Croí an Aigéin?* I said I would go with you only if you spared them!!!"

"Ná bídh eagla leanbh. Tá do thuismitheoirí ach gan aithne."

"You know I do not understand your language. Please, tell me what you've done to them!"

Do not fear child. Your parents are merely unconscious. Now, come with me. I swear no harm will come to you."

"Before we go I have a question."

"Ask, child."

"What made you so furious with my parents? How did they wrong you?" The woman's head lowered, and she lifted a dress made from the foam of the ocean. Within it were hooks, mangled nets, and the rainbow tinge of oil. The man understood immediately. His parents had been poisoning the poor woman every time they went out to fish. As they caught fish and enjoyed themselves, throwing their garbage overboard, they were poisoning and killing all that lived within the woman's domain.

"I am sorry." The woman put a finger to his lips, silencing him as she wrapped her cold arms around him.

"All is forgiven, if you come with me. When your parents awake, they will know who took you. And they will know why. They will fear me and leave this place, never to return. And you and I will protect the sea together.. You will be mine Eachtra... Eternally."

After those last words, she kissed the man deeply, like a lover. As she did so the man began to change, bones warping and melting together, skin turning dark and leathery, hair growing short and thick all over his body: he had turned into a giant sea lion. And so the sea lion

swam out to sea in her arms, lovingly caressed by the ocean. It is said that if one sings a beautiful song of sorrow and longing while at sea, one might see the queen of the ocean with her love, the sea lion, lying by her side.

Eachtra..

Cool, Bryan! You wrote that poem in the middle? Nice. Is this the end? I'm kind of waiting for something to go wrong, for the boy to mess something up and be dragged below, which I'm guessing will in turn mess up the water, "poisoned by man"? - MR C