

Tales from the Underwater City by Cassandra Parkin

Welcome to the Museum of the Hand. Here, we explore the world of our ancestors, before The Great Reclamation returned our planet to its natural form of Ocean. We invite you to marvel at the strange and enthralling lives of the ones who came before us.

Exhibit One: Signal Light

Taken from the city's final Flood Defence Wall. In ancient legends, the city's reclaiming inspired the transformation of our land-dwelling ancestors into the first true humans.

This is not an end, but a beginning
We are the ones
Who hear the siren's scream
And gather on the wall
We see the water's lick grow bolder, and we know
That this is not an end, but a beginning

We are the ones
Who only feel at home in the margins
We live at the land's edges
And cling to the corners of the room
We're too covered in our clothes
But too naked in our bare skins
We sink into silence like deep water
And spend too long in the bathtub

We are the ones
Whose grandmothers told us a story
Of a woman who came from the sea, and returned to the sea
She had another form and another life
A lover who was also her jailor
And a fur coat kept in an old trunk
The story always ended with these words:
*When the waters rise, my darling, don't be afraid
Because it will be not an end, but a beginning*

We are the ones
Who never quite grasped the art of being human
We were born with the rushing of waters in our ears
Brown water overtopping valiant concrete
Brown water reclaiming each house, and shop, and street
We are the ones who see it happen, and are not afraid, because we know
That this is not an end, but a beginning

It's as if the rising flood's uncoiled the spiral of our DNA
It's as if our flesh has always known how to make this shift
How to fuse bone and muscle into a new shape
How to grow a coat of fur and oil and fat
How to draw that first deep breath
How to plunge gladly into our new home
And know that this is not an end, but a beginning

Exhibit Fourteen: Scuba Gear

Lacking the natural ability to dive, our ancestors were forced to improvise. This is a possible source for legends of human women taking pre-human men to become their mates.

This is not a new story
These things have been done before
These things will be done again
Her fur is clean, her belly replete
She sees him come down to the shore
She watches him curiously

He has a thin woven strand of dead horse tail
A thin crook of dead carved shell
A thin shroud of dead rabbit fur

He looks bright and hungry
He looks determined and frail
She looks at him, and feels –

What is it that she feels?
What is the name for this indulgent tenderness?
What is the name for this sweet stretch of yearning?

Once, in the caves and glaciers of the high cold past
One kind, curious, reached out to another
Like but unlike, close enough to mingle

And now, on a rocky shore
A living woman sees a man woven about with death
And reaches out to him

Her low crooning calls out fur to cover his skin
Her soft singing conjures creamy fat to insulate his bones
Her sharp gasp reshapes the ugly crook of his hands

And now, he draws his first true breath
And now, he dives after her into his new, beautiful home
She has remade him in her own image

And will he love the place she's taking him?
Will he love this rich wild life of air and water?
Or will he weep for the scratch of earth, the spark of fire?

This is not a new story
These things have been done before
These things will be done again

Exhibit Twenty-Three: Pre-human skeleton, well-adapted for life on land. Note the undersized teeth, the shallow ribcage, the dramatically elongated limbs, and the opposable thumbs of the hands

How can I show them to you, the ones who came before us?
Those restless, rebellious ones, the dreamers and the makers?
They began in the water,
Their veins and arteries were full of red salt
But they gave their hearts to the dry land

They had no fangs or claws
So they learned to shape them from the rocks
They had no fur
So they taught themselves to peel the pelts of others
And to make fire

Can you imagine meeting them in those lost, dry days
Brandishing bright flames
Bristling with stone claws and teeth
Triumphant in their stolen skins?

Oh, they were terrible, and glorious
First teeth and claws and fur
Then ploughs and fields and grain-stores
Boats and nets and hooks
And trains and cars and lights and diving suits
Refrigerators, bathtubs, tin cans, plastic everything
They never stopped, could never make it stop
That need within them just like a disease

What made them themselves, and we ourselves?
We are their children, yes,
Large-brained hunters, yes, yes
But still, we are not the same
Why did they look upon Creation,
And make themselves Creators?
I think the difference is the hand.

The impulse began in their brains, yes,
But what is the thought without the action?
What is the Maker without her tools?
What is the brain without the hand?

Not just the tender cradle of the skull
But the will that lived in the bones of the hand
That endless need to create and create and create
Even when all they were making was their own destruction
I think it comes, not from the brain
But from the hand

*Exhibit Thirty-Seven: Shell necklace, used in post-Reclamation marriage rituals
conducted by surviving pre-human colonies*

I did know
All the time
That you were different

I did know
That you used to sneak off to shore
Gather wood
And build your shameful little fire
Because you still liked your fish cooked

I did know
That when we made love
You had this weird obsession
With being face to face
This weird belief
That you might crush me
This weird dislike
Of biting the back of my neck

I did know
That you were often sad
Because you missed your home
It used to puzzle me
(It still puzzles me)
How I could give you
The ocean's fertile plains
Brimming with life
Endless
And you would still be lonely
For thin green fields
Not enough food
The bite of cold air
That endless struggle against the dark

I did know
That sometimes
When you thought I was asleep
You would go off
And try to create
Try transforming one thing into another thing
Just to see what would happen
Just to see if you still could
I could live with that
It's simply the nature of your kind
Although there was that one time
When my mother saw
And I was forced to beat you

Because you were of our kind now
And it's important to fit in

I knew these things
But I just didn't know
That all these little differences
Could outweigh the love
I felt for you
And that one day
Without warning
You would undo the change I made
Shed your pelt
Climb naked onto the shore
And leave me
Filled with the unborn child we made together
And utterly alone

*Exhibit Forty-Two: Baby Rattle. Given to infants to stimulate their manual dexterity.
Date: unknown*

And now, leave this temple of the lost
Swim upwards into cool pale sunshine
Break through the surface, draw fresh breath
And come to the place of beginning

The women gather on the shore
Bellies taut with new life
Their babies will be born on this cold beach
The oldest brightest miracle

She lies down with her sisters
Their warmth sustaining her
The ebb and flow of muscle
Brings her little one safe ashore

Her child is born in wet salt
Her child is born with a caul
Her child will never drown
Her child is –
Her child is –

She coils into a protective curve
A small, brief shield for the truth
Her child has taken a new form
Her child has been born with hands

She did know who the father was
She did know his true shape
These things have been done before
These things will be done again

Her heart quickens with a terrible wonder
What mysteries will that little fist unlock?
What is the Maker without her tools?
What is the brain without the hand?

My mother, my sister, my daughter
You can't hold back the rising tide
This fear is simply the shock of the new
Because this is not an end, but a beginning