

Dropped stones, skimmed skin

by Alison Wells

Skim. The stone slipped across the top of the water. The sea was a battleship grey with a liver of cerulean, foaming at the lips its puckered kisses smacking on the shore. Dip, dip, the stone, flat and oval skudded across the ocean night, like a satellite on a far flung trajectory, unspun from orbit, now loosed across the dark matter heavens. Dropped.

Barbara took off her clothes. There was always a nip in October. Toes. They curled against the element of wind. Out on the promontory a man was walking his dog or wrestling a whale or hanging onto an umbrella, it was hard to tell. Rain spat and she tasted salt. The sea leapt and she drank of a spring. Because of everything before, her skin was crying.

Matthew couldn't touch her, at first for fear, then out of respect, then apropos of revulsion. That revulsion unsaid of course, caught in the gullet, closed in behind tight mealy mouthed lips, an indigestion of horror. There are phases in intimacy aren't there? That amorphous amour from a distance, then the jasmine hint of possibility, then that full clothed shuddering, the turning inside out of velvet pockets, swan necks looping. Then there is the breath.

Then there is the tuning on the shore, dark sand, the retreat, the furrow, the frown. And the froth ran backwards through the music of pebbles. And the sand hoped. Went dry. Would have wept, disintegrated.

They kept pieces of her in kidney shaped dishes, wiped the scalpels clean. And Matthew held her as if he was very far away in history, as if she was in his past, a relic that turns to dust in the light. And back in their bed at night, she felt that kisses could have been glue.

She throws herself into the water. Skims across the frantic surface first. Dip. Dip. Her legs and arms are bare, the suit sagging, this shrivelled skin.

So cold. The foam folds round her body, smooth. The water is sloshing under her suit. Salt lingers on the wound, the ridge of it, like puckered shore shapes. And the tenderness of sea is the inverse of betrayal. How could he forget the press of their souls against one another, the kiss of affinity, the lapping of likeness, the mapping of cells that sung with recognition?

Her head is bare. As smooth as the stone.

She drops. Inside the water she is a whole thing, swims. And the pull of her limbs is the evidence of hope. And her skin wears the grit of the salt, grit, like her teeth when she thought she might die, when they sent the chemical elixir through her veins and it journeyed from the outside in. When she and he kept everything in, screams, protestations, that horror in a purse, turned at last frantically inside out. Where did I leave my pain?

Matthew couldn't find the words, the associations left him bereft. There was always that smell about her, the signature of decay. Betray, it's such a hefty accusation; he would not leave it at his own door. He remembered her dancing at the beginning; the Twist or something that caught her in his mind, spinning, unwinding, spinning again. He did not want to juxtapose the light of her with this. Amour inside armour. The back of the newspaper was always fascinating.

He wasn't a swimmer. Once or twice he had paddled with their daughter Emily, his shins and ankles blindingly white and hairy. When she was two she didn't like the way the sand at the shore stuck to her wet feet. She was forever trying to wash it off but when she came out of the water it stuck on again. She sat in the foam and cried.

Barbara came out of the water, shook herself like a dog, hairless. The water rolled down the curve of her neck, it rolled into the dip at the top of her suit, kissed the place where her breasts had been. She was clean. The wind was the slice of a knife. The man with his dog

was closer now, lifted his hand in a gracious salute. The sand on the edge of the shore was so dark and the foam rushing in was so white.

