

*If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that
-Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West"*

Ocean in Thirds

i. Foot-swept

Like all sirens, the ocean could not stop.
It sang what it heard and, singing, lured,
dropping her into man-tall waves.

From crests, she saw sandpipers
running up and down isles,
stabbing the sand.
Spurned seagulls swam overhead
and sharks, smelling the drench
of lust and longing,
left her alone.

She knew this ocean, a god
too vast to notice,
would absorb her, indifferent.
She knew, and floated
until a drift of seaweed
brushing her cheek
became her husband's hands.

She began to swim,
dragging waves,
trailing froth and darting fish
so small and quick they disappeared
on second glances.
Shining with salt,
she walked the marbled sand,
catching drops before they fell,
carrying them in cupped hands.

But by the time she got home,
shirt stiff and sea-stained,
by the time she opened
the heavy wood door,
by the time the waves
gave way to ripples
in familiar floorboards,
she was dry
and forgetting how to carry
an ocean in her skin.

ii. Eros's song

*Give me his arched
& shifting biceps,
his rough stained cuticles,
his short-quill cheeks
that scratch you red.*

*Give me his books,
his bookshelves,
his pages of polysyllables
& carefully grown paragraphs.*

*Give me the light in his bathroom
that buzzes & drones.
Give me the throb of his pulse
when nightmares stalk him,
& the salt of his sweat when he wakes.*

*Give me his cuts, his bruises, his scars;
give me the stories behind them. Give me
the broken glass, the slipped blades,
the half-remembered childhood traumas.*

*Give me his exes, the girlfriends & wives,
the one night drunken fiascoes, the stalkers,
the ones who never could claim him.*

*Give me the second bedroom
that stands empty, waiting for children.*

*Give them. Give them to me
& in the emptiness, be sated
by his absence.*

iii. Between the ocean and the land

Between the wild roses, dead-budded,
and the cacti browned,

between the garage wall spattered with weeds,
and the leaning fence, she slides to her knees,

begins to dig. Only spade-fuls
at first, sandy soil heaping in small piles

then deeper, the shovel digging spasms into her back,
until clots of severed earth grow hip high.

She layers and levels, arches and tucks;
her legs clutch, her throat dries.

She fills it from the rusty spigot sprouting brick-side like rot.
Ten trips.

She rims it in rocks and blue beach glass
that fall to fool the fish with glint and glimmer.

She invites her husband
to dangle, to splash.

He sprinkles fish food. She feeds
by holding flakes between fingers

until small mouths clasp, pull.
She imagines them claiming her.

She imagines him,
brow-creased, calling her back.

But, silent, he stares and stands
when she steps in, sits back, lays still.

Fish kiss shoulders,
nipples, thighs—

he walks inside, smiling,
better things to do.

She listens to water
tell her heartbeat back

but say nothing in the pause.
So she stands. The pond rushes down,

back to its small gods, back
to lusting frogs, tender shade.

And that night, her husband flung
like a starfish beside her,

she dreams in oceans,
and wakes with salt on her tongue.

--Rebecca Block