A Ring of Gold

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Abstract
Always at new moon and full moon extremes of tide scarred this southern shore, back beach and front beach alike, and this year the last king tide of the winter was dose on the equinox. A storm and days of heavy swell had sent high waves to lick away at the dunes, undermining them and making sand-slides, flattening, withering, scouring the ropy roots of the marram grass. In the calm that followed, a low tide at midday left the rock shelf of the headland wide open to the sun. Its thickly knit brown hide of bladderwrack glistened, with a summer steam coming up, early as it was, only mid-September, its gloss drying in the late winter sun. More bladderwrack lay rotting in mounds along the dunes, and bull kelp with clawed black holdfasts on tough legs, some shod with stone.
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As on every other day, the woman was walking along the water’s edge under the lighthouse, where the rock shelf ran under the sand except for limestone formations here and there that stood out high, grey fretworks of rock hoary with salt in the early afternoon between tides. It was a Sunday, and fine at last, and among the regulars walking their dogs, some on a lead and some loose, there were little groups of city people just down for the weekend. Up ahead on the waterline where a spur of rock split into pools of deep water she saw black figures gathering against the light, some stooping to clip a dog’s lead on, and voices yelping. Eel, she made out, See the eel! And a couple hurrying past said loudly, A seal’s been washed up. Alive? Seems so.

A seal. Alive? Oil-dark, water-dark and glossy as the bull kelp, there it was, a blot on the wet sand, rearing and blinking in the sun and taking no notice of the gathering onlookers. They kept pace alongside it while it went back in, floundering in and out of the low pools and channels, the water breaking over it so that it looked like any smooth rock. The woman’s heart beat hard. In all her years she had never seen a live seal on the beach and she strained her eyes now to see the last of its rolling back as it made its way out to sea.

But it changed its mind. It turned and was heaving up the beach again on its bent wrists, tucking its back flippers in like a dog its tail, to sit with closed eyes, its narrow nose lifted and the long whiskers coppery in the sun. It shook itself suddenly and sent spray over the onlookers, who fell back exchanging shamefaced grins and remarks at their own jumpiness. A beading of water shone on the cape of fur over the shoulders and the tips of the ears that poked down like dark little teats. Could it hear the voices? Her own ears were too full of harsh breath. The crowd edged
closely, they could not get enough of the wonderful apparition. What does it want? a child asked, and was answered in hisses and mutters. Is it hurt? Not as far as I can see. Is it a him or a her? Male, by the size. Yeah, it's a bull. Huge! See the mane? An old fella too by the look. Is he sick, Ma? Ma, is the seal sick? Well, if he's on his own I suppose.

The seal's rump and belly had a pale coat of sand. Absently he scratched his back with a hind flipper while his pin head rolled. For a moment his eyes opened, dark eyes, globular, and again he shook a spray of sand and water off, a halo of light. Then he was off and humping down the sand laboriously. His track was a double warping like that of a turtle, a caterpillar tyre, perhaps, which the dogs on leads came stiff-legged to sniff at, hackles rising. But they backed away fast when he turned around. He was tough-haired like a cattle dog but they all knew it was no dog that was oozing and moiling up the beach again.

Fluid, wire-whiskered, blind, monumental, the seal sat and shook his water off. He bent himself to scratch and sent more spray flying out with his flipper, which was a long-boned hand of bronze, she saw, a mailed hand. This time two girls dared to step up close, giggling, and then a young man. Some of the onlookers exchanged grins. Tame for his size, eh, someone said, poor thing. There was a shift of mood as plain as a tide and everyone felt it, how the awe was seeping away and threatening to turn to contempt, impatience, hostility. The woman's heart sank. Any minute now, she thought, Someone is going to make the first move, throw a stone or sand in its face, slip a dog's lead for the hell of it. It only takes one. She moved forward. You know seals are protected, she got ready to say.

The girl who was in front of the seal was moving her body now in time with his swayng, insistently, as if they were at a dance, looking up into his face because he was so tall, taller than any of the men there, even the surfer they were with, and her hair swung from shoulder to shoulder catching in the light, like a pendulum. The seal was taking no notice, the eyes in his roving head fixed somewhere beyond, out of reach, so that the other girl was emboldened to lean in and whisper in her friend's ear, a dare perhaps, or a warning, a splutter of laughter.

The seal reared up. Suddenly he saw where he was. He saw the crowd of faces that were close enough to kiss. Suddenly eye to eye he took them in and his head split open, a throat stretched wide, a ring of yellow bone, a silent roar as he swayed there like a cobra. Transfixed, they were all bathed in a sour hot breath of fish. Then before anyone could move he convulsed. With a cobra's speed he whipped away and in seconds the dark bulk of him was gone from the sand, leaving them gaping, and gone from the shallows, surging strongly from pool to pool out into the high breakers of the Rip.

It had happened faster than the shocked girls could leap back into the circle of onlookers, who in their turn gaped in fright, and then laughed, shaking their heads in amazement. There was an outbreak of relieved chatter, the hilarity that comes after a close escape - Shit look at him go!
He won't be back in a hurry! Nothing much wrong with him - as they scattered with their dogs along the beach.

All but the woman, who was left standing rigid, open-mouthed with shock. Before her eyes was the salmon-rose throat of the seal open in a mute, a mutual scream of appalled recognition.

More and more now she lived for the warm weather, slow as it was to arrive on this coast, and intermittent at the best of times, not to be trusted. For half the year a heavy wind from the south flayed the branches off trees and jolted roof iron, filling every space with the salt and seethe, the noise of rough water. A still day was a rare blessing: the sense of hiatus, the silent air, the sea barely moving. It would come to seem a memory at the back of the mind, an urgent, impossible longing, the way a silence could fall like that, out of nowhere, as if time itself had stopped. Even in midsummer the heat could be swept away for ten days or a fortnight at a time by a gale out of the south that tugged at roofs and branches, whipping the waves high over the seawall, tearing the bluestone blocks out to sea, felling fences. She battened down through the cold months and waited for the sun to bring her to life much as the skinks did that she came across from time to time on the path down the dunes on the first warm calm days in spring, crouched with their hands spread out on the top of a fence post, as still as the wood, grey whorls and stripes and a red eye. They would wait until the last minute and then spring off, whip into the scrub. There were larger lizards hidden in their thick hides, invisible snakes that flowed like hot glass over the sand. All the wildlife of the dunes lay low through the long dream of the winter. Numb of flesh, inert, congealed they lay in wait for the sun.

The back beach at the foot of the dunes was full of traps, sharp rocks and undertows, tangles of weed. As a child she had hated swimming here. Try as she might to keep to where it was safe, she would always be carried stumbling on to hidden rocks sooner or later, or knocked down by a wave and carried out of her depth. There were so many dark masses, either rocks or seaweed, and a threat either way. Her own children had been the same, but by then she had the remedy. The mask changed all that. Once you saw the underwater as it really was, your fear was gone. You found your way easily among the rocks that in the water light were more richly coloured than dry rock on land, and through the weeds in their lushness, intricate, ambered, layer on layer, weightless, in constant motion as the water moved. Since the day she first put on a mask and lost her fear, although she was still wary, she never saw any point in going in for the sake of it, swimming blind.

When there was surf it was impenetrable. Even on calm days the water seen from outside, from above, was a mass of glazed blue opacities. Not when she saw into them and beyond as they were underneath, massifs riven into canyons and arches furred with auburn plumes and straps of succulent weed that rolled and swayed or slowly unravelled, depending on the tide, and some were in skeins of old rose, shrill green. Fastened in
the dapple of the rock faces were blond fans, grapes and feathers and
tight scrolls, flukes, foxtails, banks of moss, hairy pods, mussel-black and
green, and soft ones the colour of pussy willow. Now and then a shower
of silver needles went by. A blunt fish there in a hollow was a parrot fish
lurking, wary at the size of her; here a small one in a yellow and grey
striped vest waited almost until her hand closed over it before jerking
away as if on a string. Glass shrimps hung like hairs in a bunch of
bubbles. Sometimes other divers waved their blue limbs in the distance,
slow giants magnified in the water. You yourself were magnified. As you
approached the turbulent outer edge of the rock pools the water turned
icy and was crossed with cloudy shafts of sun that dissolved all around
you into sand, bubbles and specks of weed glittering like mica. Even in
hot weather you could only stay in a short time before you froze. A cold
fall of water was pouring through the Rip from the swell out in the strait,
deep water overwhelming the pools, filling the bay with a rain of sand.

It was a summer town built on the last spit of scrubland dividing the bay
from the open sea, and popular for holidays because of the chain of front
beaches scooped out of the cliff between headlands and held in by a
bluestone seawall. The town came to a high point at the last headland
with its lighthouse, beyond which the dunes began and the surf beach.
The headland was the border where two seas met, and two climates,
since often enough the bay was a brown bowl of wind on a day that was
all glassy stillness just around the corner at the backbeach, and yet
calm, barely rippling, when the surf ran wild and high.

All manner of curiosities washed up on this border, charred logs,
crates, spars, oiled seabirds and ships' garbage that she picked up and
put in a bin or passed by angrily, according to her mood. She poked at
the mounds of seaweed, idly fossicking. Once she stumbled on a whole
shark under the seawall. Night was falling and at first in the half light she
thought it was alive. A long leathery grey body, as long as her own, with
not a scratch, and heavy - she tugged at the dorsal fin, but it dragged her
arms down. Slit white eyes and a puffy maw caked with sand, toothless,
a gummy shark - why should it be dead?

It was unscathed as far as she could tell. She washed her hands in the
sea and then over and over with soap, but the stench of shark fin clung.
Around sunset on one of the early hot days in November as she groped
after a green chunk of bottle glass in a crevice in the rocks at the foot of
the cliff, a cave under the high water line - the beach a long expanse at
low tide, with net on yellow net of water being quietly cast up and pulled
tight on the sand - something else glinted at the corner of her eye. She
reached out and there it suddenly was, wet on her finger and not, as she
thought at first, the ringpull from a can but a real ring. Gold, uninscribed
but for a scratch or two, it was most likely a wedding ring, a man's, by
the size of it, she thought, since she had thick fingers for a woman and it
was loose on her. A lot of husbands wore a ring these days. Not her
husband, who would have scoffed at the idea, who had been dead and
buried for so long that she barely remembered his face. Loose though it was, it rasped at the loose skin over her knuckle and, tugging uselessly, she felt the welling up of an old anger, even panic. The ridges of skin and the knuckle bone made a bar and the ring had drawn blood, or the sand on it had, by the time she thought of soap. Then it slid off easily enough.

She drove around to the police station, where the officer on duty said that if the ring went unclaimed for three months she could keep it if she desired. It said so on the form: I *desire / *do NOT desire to claim the above property. In the space for the description he wrote One gold coloured ring. Now he crossed out *do NOT, she signed on the line and a pink slip was handed over. She took the trouble to have a notice stuck in the milk bar window, where it stayed put, fading to parchment week by week in the summer heat and the bold ink gone grey.

It was never a constant heat down here, it came and went in waves, but this summer was shaping up as one of the rare good ones, still and barely stirred by wind, becalmed, a heat wave without movement like the eye of a storm. More and more as she walked at low tide on the sand bed among the rocks she felt the presence of a swimming self who had hovered open-armed like a bird over this sand, these rocks, and would again soon, a shadow in green shreds moving underneath. Well into the night now and into the morning and on, the house held the day's heat. After dark she mostly did without the electric lights, for the sake of the small difference it might make, that one degree cooler. In the gloom the gas under her saucepan shone like a ring of blue teeth. If there was a moon, she left the blinds up at bedtime rather than swelter in the dark, almost as if moonlight had the power to cool the rooms. Her sleep was never deep then and she woke with a shiver at daybreak, as always, only to see that the clock was on 2:28, and then 3:44, 5:00, and the bed a raft in a sea of milk. A heat wave at full moon was the best of all. Like water the moon found every chink of the simmering house. In the cool of the morning she went in for a swim and again in the late afternoon, although only at the front beach. The surf beach was too far to walk in the exhausting heat, and driving was worse, the car baking, gritty with sand. But at night she would often walk there and stay until midnight or longer. The stars for light, and the red tip of the lighthouse as it burned on and off, on and off, like a cigarette someone was drawing on. Afterwards she slept light. She swam through a milky trail of bubbles and from time to time the seal rose up from the sea, rose and sank, and she heard his harsh breathing, or her own, or the sea. I stitch the sea with a white thread, in and out, she dreamed, and my hot head fills with water.

At the foot of the lighthouse she came across some cast-up plastic one day, a white shampoo flask with a green lid, perfectly smooth, silken, the wording on it almost erased, and anyway the salt north wind whipping at her eyelids and lashes was making her eyes run. The underside had a thick pelt of something, seaweed, she thought, turning it over, but it was
barnacles, dozens, of a sort that she had only ever seen in books, goose- 
barnacles, big and small, clamped on a bed of grit. They were grey with 
streaks, marbled, rimmed and striped once across in black, little mitres all 
shut tight. A shank held each one so fast she could not have prised even 
the smallest one off without crushing it. A shank of tough jelly, it was 
colourless except where it emerged thick and black from the shell. Dead 
or alive, they were worth a closer look. She took the flask home where, 
her attention distracted, she put it down on the draining board and forgot 
about it. Nevertheless it tugged at her thought, the way a drop of water 
as it trickles from wrist to elbow will pull the line of skin after itself. The 
flask pulled tenaciously at her attention, until she went back and saw to 
her horror that the sun had been on it, and the afterglow still was, and 
ants were massing. The pelt on the flask was alive, it was all one ripple, a 
wave of movement, each mitre shifting, restless, and opening to let a 
small black tongue with whiskers come poking into the air, and wave, 
straining, a blind probe. They shrank in at a touch. From this mass there 
came a ceaseless whispering and clacking, a susurrus, a cry of air. On the 
beach there had been no sign of life, no sound and in the salt wind no 
smell: now they emitted a strong salt smell, musty, rich, incipiently 
rotten, that filled the room, and their urgency so inhabited her that she 
ran with the bottle back along the sandy path and down the steps to the 
beach in the half-light – it was after eight now and the sun had set – 
where she flung it and watched it float, jostling in the wash, a life raft, 
she thought, out to a rock pool until a wave wedged it under an over­ 
hang dripping with brown seagrapes. The raft of the Medusa, and she 
turned away. She knew goose-barnacles could only live in the deep sea.

The school holidays brought the campers and the daytrippers. As usual 
these days her own children and grandchildren had better things to do 
than come down here. Which suited her well enough. Living alone might 
have its drawbacks, but at least now she had no one to please but herself. 
Her seven years of widowhood had slipped by so easily and fast that she 
was surprised, looking back. If what she had read was true and the body 
renewed itself cell by cell every seven years, each one as it died being 
replaced by a new cell in a slow invisible wave of change, then nothing 
was left of her as she was then, a husband’s wife. Not one cell of this 
body had ever known a man. It was as if she was restored to a virginity 
of sorts, a second virginity of age, and endurance, solitude. A freedom – 
since to have worked her way so loose must amount to freedom, she 
supposed, though it was a dour freedom, if so. And, if so, it only 
matched what she had become. She was her own being, for better or for 
worse, flesh and blood. Lust was long gone, outgrown with the old life. 
The moon had no more influence now, waxing and waning, and there 
were no more tides of blood.

Pleasing herself then, she swam. For most of the summer the morning 
sea was still too cold from the night, and in the heat of the day the 
beaches were a furnace. But by four in the afternoon she was ready. The
water was golden by then like a pane of lamplit glass, thick and dimpled like a pub window. She gave herself up to the lovely lapse of the flesh as it dissolved and floated, barely visible, almost asleep. When she came dripping into the house an orange afterlight lay sprinkled all over the floor. Sometimes the sky was dim and the sun scarlet, and she thought a storm was brewing. The wind would change, but then the sky cleared a little – the sun still not fully clear for the rest of the evening, but creamy, opaque. And in the morning it would be hot and still again with no sign of a change, as if the heat wave were a spell it was under, a blessed interval.

She was never a beach-lover as such. She never sunbaked before or after. It was only the undersea, and even so she took care not to stay in long. There was an old wetsuit in the house, if she could be bothered wrestling it on: she preferred bathers with a T-shirt, less for the slight warmth than for the sake of her fair skin in the sun. Even between swims she would change straight out of these wet clothes that clung too coldly and get dry. She feared the sea cold, the way it penetrated to her very bones and lasted long after she came out and was sweaty and red, gasping. It was a different cold from that of weather, and she knew it to the quick of her, knew it in her bones, as the saying went. She could feel the stiffness of cold in them as she walked. In her mind’s eye the bones were green, knobbly and barbed, stirring inside a filmy flange like egg white, like a jellyfish mantle, which was her own flesh. It went back to her childhood, of course, the memory of the X-ray machine that used to be in shoeshops. You stood against it with your feet in the slot and there was a porthole on top like a diving mask that let you watch them moving. Bony, dismembered, cold and green, underwater feet.

This summer was another matter. This summer she could spend hours of every afternoon in the deep gold of the water, clear pale gold and dark gold, the colour of beer, in a tight webbing. It was murky underwater with the tide well past the turn. Little fat fish fled to crouch in the weeds as they swung sharply back and forward in a shower of sand. Murky underwater, although seen from above the water had gone that transparent deep gold. But then it was deceptive, notoriously not to be trusted. Always there was turbulence on the shores of the Rip, currents so suddenly icy from out in the strait that a swimmer would stiffen, transfixed, fighting for breath. Every once in a while a diver was swept out and fished up, long since drowned, by helicopter, and sightseers lined the cliffs and the jetty. Storms struck and overturned boats. But you always knew where you were on the front beach. Two arms of rock sheltered it and the sand accumulated there, so that the shallows went out a long way and they were bath-warm. In spite of the many rocks – blanketed in flat seaweed and green out of the water, but once underwater, deep dark blue – this was where everyone came. She picked her slow way out through the paddlers and the rocks into the deep water and back. Day after day the world she came up into would be stiff to her eyes, dry and sparse, glaring with a yellow heat that was wearisomely
heavy to move in. People sat gasping, shining red under a film of sweat. No one could remember a summer like it, the March flies like wasps and the gardens simmering with mosquitoes. The afternoon sea breezes failed and what shade there was as it lengthened, even the dense shade of the pines along the seawall, was no match for the heat. Night brought little diminishment. If anything it was harder to breathe after dark in the blinded houses. In cupboards and wardrobes the heat brewed. Even after a cool change had sent the wind hissing all through the house you only had to open a cupboard door for the stored heat to come spilling out all over you.

Summer meant a stuffy nose day and night, a rustling of fullness in your ears when you moved your head, loud and furtive like paper being uncrumpled, the sea water shifting its weight. Whatever you heard through water was magnified, as well as whatever you looked at. It ran out warm on the pillow at last, one side and then the other, a molten discharge. In the morning the pillow had snail-crusts of salt and this was the way of the childhood summers she remembered, heat-struck, the amplified thunderous sea in her ears, the sea smell, a scrape of rough sand in the sheets. In her sleep she was any age and all the ages she had been. A heat wave gave you into another life, floating swollen with lightness, diaphanous, a water being.

Once at the end of a sultry day when she came down for a swim, bait fish were strewn about as bright and sharp as knife blades. Nets, rods, and buckets were everywhere and men scrabbling for worms. There was a heavy pulse, and a hissing, rustling noise. It came from many big barrel-bodied grey fish that were flapping on the wet sand in a heap behind each man knee-deep in the water with a rod, pulling them in. No time to waste in killing what would die of its own accord sooner or later. Among the gear were plastic bags, slimed and bloodied and crammed with more fish, mullet, yellow-eye mullet, still arching, flailing, eyes and mouths wild. A gleeful little boy ran from heap to heap poking a finger at them. Sick, she turned back. Along its full length the beach was alive with the flutter and glint of their dying.

A knock at the front door one February morning: a policeman, taking her aback. He handed over the ring in an envelope, and the book for signing. One gold coloured ring. She slit the envelope: yes, it was the right ring. She had no doubt that it was real gold – not that she cared, when she had a wedding ring of her own that she hadn't worn for years, finding it a burden, and no reason to desire another one whoever it was. What had made her say she would? Well, she could always sell it. With this ring, she thought, until death us do part and so it had and the marriage was over and done with. This ring that lay cold in the hollow of her hand, her property now: she had forgotten all about it. She stared, puzzled why anyone would take their ring off at the beach. It was surely asking for trouble. Unless you were having a quarrel, then you might.
Whoever it was had never bothered to make enquiries. Although it might have come off in the water, if it came to that, or been thrown in from somewhere else, anywhere, the cliff top, or a ship, even, and washed up here. Maybe someone’s ashes had been scattered at sea and the ring with them. What was it worth? She put it in her purse with a vague idea of having it valued when she was in town, but as the days passed so did any thought of selling it.

Since it might slip through her fingers among the loose change in her purse, she put it on a shelf of the dresser with other things from the sea on a nap of sand: shells and crab casts, a rose cuttlebone with a hood of white, a sea urchin with its red stubble, a bird skull like a shell on a white chain, a crab nipper inkwashed blue and the chunk of bottle glass, jade-green.

The gold caught the light. Wherever she moved it to among the sandy relics sooner or later it caught the light, the living gold. When it began to weigh on her she shut it with her old ring and the necklaces, amber, Venetian glass and bloodstone, in the camphorwood box. Still it felt wrong to have it there, it was not at home among the jewellery of her younger days or anywhere else in the house either. Whose property was it really? At a loss she held it in the palm of her hand, a circle of light and shadow on the crumpled skin. Where would it be at home, if it came to that?

Meanwhile she dropped it among the clothes in a drawer. She was never going to wear it and yet selling it had over time become unthinkable, she would as soon have sold her real, her own wedding ring. *Desire. In her dreams she saw it dilate as she bent closer, auburn frills of seaweed and then a glint, a pale hoop half in half out of the sand, the water. Nevertheless, one day close on sunset, which came a lot earlier now, she thrust it in her pocket and walked to the lookout on the cliff halfway between the front and back beach. The crevice where she had found the ring was directly underneath, but it was high tide and there was no beach there. Sand and rock, it was hidden under a swill of waves and froth, swinging and crashing head-on along the invisible rifts of the rock shelf. Again it was deep in shadow.

Only a flock of gulls drifting, balancing on the wind long-legged, were still alight with sun. She threw the ring out as far as she could, so high that it shone like a star in among them before diving down and taking a shred of the flock down with it out of sight.

Still the hot weather held and the house, like the sea, had its continuous tides of heat and cold that lagged behind those of the night and day. The moon waxed and waned, and rose and set. Of all this she was aware, fully attentive to the rhythms without knowing that she was, and having no need of a clock any more, or the calendar, tide tables, knowing anyway, as she had never done since her childhood. It was the immortal first summer of memory and dream and the essence of summer.

Well into March the spell of heat endured, barely broken by a week of
wind and rough seas that swamped the beaches. White waves broke against the dunes and the box-shaped grey standing rocks and swilled up over the flat rock that was like an old man’s sleeping head at the foot of the lighthouse and splashed the bottom stairs. Even the planks of the pier were awash. When the weather cleared and the sun came out it was warm and yet unmistakably now, for the first time that year, the hazy salt still warmth of autumn.

All along the front beach the mounds of seaweed lay rotting, infested with fleas. More weed swilled in the shallows. The pitted rock face of the cliffs around the headland were suddenly thick with little midges that you triggered off if you walked past, mass after mass, black outbursts that pattered and clung, a blind whirring. The sun was low and the sand more than half in shadow. For once she had it all to herself, as she wavered at the thick edge of the water. The forecast was rain and a strong wind warning and she knew this was the last hot spell, if she wanted another swim, the tail end of the summer, on the hinge between seasons. But not here, not in this stagnation. This once, for the sake of its vast bare wash of sky and sand, she would go on under the lighthouse in the distilled heat of the day and around to the surf beach.

Here too, if you looked, there were the traces of the battering of the past week, loops and shreds and grass skirts of bladderwrack strung up drying at the high tide line and along the torn fence of the dune, strings of beads, amber, oiled wood, white shells in the marram grass that shone at the rim of the dunes. But it faced west and was still flooded with light, washed clean, as she had known it would be: the sand and sea one white glaze and, apart from the usual encampment of surfers and dogs a long way off, black dots against the sun, she had it to herself. As always she stripped and went straight in, by instinct finding a channel of sand in the rock shelf at the place, she remembered as the cold clutched at her, where the seal had bolted and dived away all those months ago. It was low water now as it had been then. Green, gold and bronze the weedbeds of the pools lay still and warm with long pulsing hairy arms swaying, and her slow flippers, and the yellow webs of the light that pulled in tighter as they were disturbed, and then laid open all their weave again. This was the place of the apparition of the seal, where he reared on the sand and gaped and fled convulsing in all his length, a seal taller than anyone thrusting his furious way out to sea. His eyes were bronze-black and so were his long-boned hands. The rocks all around her bristled and shone with strings of drops and bubbles. His head had split like a wound, like a husk, a pod to lay open a great flower, two petals dyed crimson, hot with breath, silenced, a raw mouth. And the disparition of the wonderful seal.

The turbulence took her by surprise, a tall wave heaving itself sheer over the edge of the rock shelf, flooding the pool. She rose and was flung hard against rock, a jagged overhang, bladderwrack, and her shoulder stung, and her nose, her scalp, a sharp gash, a burning, as the wave swept back through and over a channel and she was through, she was
over the edge in the open water and choking on mouthfuls, the snorkel swinging as she filled to her depths with cold water, her head, her belly, her cunt. She groped for the mask and fingers jabbed her in the eye as she smashed on the rock wall again in the violence of the water. Her other hand was jammed — she wrenchéd, groping for a foothold — in a clamp of rock and she let go of the mask, cracked across with a wire of light, to toss and twist free. But she was wedged fast, her mouth wide in a scream of water, swatches of hair and seaweed streaming red.

A moaning in her ears woke her. She was flat on her back on the beach, the hard sand, with a numbness in her and an ache, her head on fire, and a great shuddering that was making her teeth knock. She was sour to the belly, salt or vomit searing her throat, and her eyes stung when they opened on to the sky, on to a ring of heads all staring down, shadowy, not anyone she knew. Dazzled, she squinted up, fighting to lift her head, but it was heavy and flopped weakly back. She shut her eyes. Something sharp and hot rasped at her mouth. Her scalp was shrunk tight on the bone. She raised a hand to feel for the mask but no, and her bathers and shirt were torn. In spite of the cold all her skin burned as if stung. There was no response in the other hand — she craned — bundled up in strips of cloth. Now the heads above were bandying words and she snatched at them, though they were too fast, her sick head shaking them away. Just about scalped. Ambulance. Alive. Yeah, I reckon. Just as well. Swallered a heap. Like a skun rabbit. Hands a mess. Yeah, mangled. Shit yeah, well what do you. Top of the steps and this wave come up all black. What I said, pitch black. Full of kelp and it come right up over the reef. Could have been a shark or anything. Fuck. And in we charge and the next thing whoosh, up she. Jesus. One lucky lady. Steps? she thought. Wave? — but her mind kept closing over, squeezing shut, like an eye in the fire of the sun. She was cold on a towel clumpy with sand and a dry one was spread over the half-naked masses of her. A harsh breath somewhere near was a dog, panting — jingling, and a cold spray tickled her skin as he shook himself. Go on, she heard loudly, out the way now, good dog. Then a crackling like thunder in her ears dimmed out the voices overhead. Just outside and beyond all this and so near was the edge of the deep sea, the stillness. Why did they have to come along and interfere? What did they think was the point of going in after her and hauling her back high and dry on the beach and wringing her out like a trough of washing? It meant a loss that nothing on earth could make good, so vast no one would ever know the full extent. She had had her chance and missed it. Anyone know where she lives? — a voice cut loudly in — on the phone, love? No good, she heard, no. Lives on her own. She flung her arms open, fighting for more air in the crush of legs and shadows. Someone knelt quickly down at her side, a rough head blocking her field of vision and at that she got her head up at last and her mouth open to scream, only all that would come was silence, was breath in a noiseless thread of dribble, half blood, half sea water.