

ANNE GOLDMAN



The Kingdom of the Medusae

A beached jellyfish quivers on the sand. Exposed to the ache of oxygen, it waits to be savaged by sun or torn apart by a gull. Throngs of these creatures are flung on land in the wake of storms. Deprived of the environment that gives them buoyancy, they collapse like gashed floats. It would be easy to mistake the stranded thing on the shoal for a burst balloon flecked with sand. In the ocean, the jelly flexed and relaxed without surcease. Contracting, it propelled itself toward the sunlit surface; fanning open, it hovered on a roller and drifted downward.

Most of the medusae flourish near the coast, close to the turquoise atmosphere we breathe. Comb jellies weave through seaweed trawling for plankton, quiet as electric cars nosing into traffic. Sea nettles sway below the surf—their yolky bells could be parachutes hung with crepey streamers. A transparent circle rides the swell—a moon jelly cruising currents as its milky mother does the night sky. Far below this disc, distant-seeming as nebulae are from the frangible blue of Earth's atmosphere, the deep-sea jellyfish throb incandescent. Sinuous as belly dancers, symmetrical as snowflakes, they trail color purer than tulips. Unhurried in pressures that blow out the eardrums of divers and crack the iron hulls of submarines, they float and pulse and glide.

To see these creatures in their element, you must deprive yourself of yours. Start by letting your eyes wander below the line that divides air and ocean (two blurry squares the painter Rothko might have stacked, not quite touching, on a canvas). Spume froths at your feet. Another wave runs up and slides back across the fizzing sand. Gulls cry overhead before a breeze swoops in and sends them flying sideways. The wind finds you, too, and prickles your skin with goose bumps. You wade in then, past toddlers who squat at the edge of the tide. The brims of their hats cast shadowy circles that hover by the rushing water. A cloud covers the sun and the air darkens and grays; grays and darkens the sea its mirror. Walk toward the horizon until

the breeze parts around your waist and a mother sitting next to a sandcastle finds you cut in half by the sea, this rampart's monarch. Pebbles support your feet and a round stone briefly hobbles you. Then there is no floor. Released from its burden, your backbone curves and your head sways like a buoy. Underneath the surface, your arms and legs tread the tide with supple, spidery motions. Inhale deeply, pull the water over your head like a blanket, and dive.

Kids' high cries stop mid-shriek.

Sound subsides to muffled murmur. Fish thrash in the beaks of birds, battles you cannot hear. Pale pink, the soles of swimmers scissor the luminous water above you. The ocean trembles in your ears with soft shudders, whispery movements that never cease.

*... why do we sigh for the dark, downward, vegetating kingdom... **

From a boat tossing on top of the ocean's surface where the water is deepest, a small motor whirs for forty-five minutes as a rope drops to the bottom and is hauled back up. Marine detritus tumbles through the mountain-heavy column for several months before completing the descent. Liquid but laden, a scuba diver plunges one hundred and thirty feet. The skin chills inside the rubber suit. The lungs fill and empty, whistling the *ujai* breath yoga practitioners make to mimic the sea. A good free diver can plummet three hundred feet on a single breath, each cubic foot cinching the body tighter. Halfway to the mark, the circulatory system shunts blood from the legs to the chest. Water boulders the back, compressing the lungs to fist-sized masses.

Assisted by the imagination and unfettered by these pressures, you fall much farther. In the space of a paragraph, you journey thirteen thousand feet below the cerulean surface: past the sapphire effulgence where the free diver has stopped and turned her face toward the stars, past the twilight where tropical fish blanch like mushrooms, past the midnight blue of the deep, cobalt caverns sonar telegraphs into spare music. The water is black below you; a navy just shy of black is the water above.

*...repeated evidence has proved that it can live on what can not revive its youth... **

Rocks rise like dim skyscrapers; a moment later, your feet touch the floor. In this atmosphere four hundred times heavier than air, the walls of submarines buckle and tear. Gauges go silent; quartz windows explode. The weight of water hums and vibrates in your chest. The light on your visor casts a monochrome circle around you, revealing a gravelly, potholed surface. With each step you stir the powdered remains of crustaceans. Miniature storm clouds rise, blurring the bottom. You might be an astronaut exploring the dark space around Earth; a watcher in the ocean would see you illumined in the grayscale of moonwalkers. The water seems a void, like the waste between stars. Eddying pitch-colored outside the perimeter of your light, liquid hovers like sleep under closed eyelids.

Imagine the still, dense night. Imagine this privation wanting feeling, this nothing before time and weather, this well of loneliness the color of crows, of carbon.

...into this absence appears the jellyfish...

A thought emerging out of insentience, it hovers brilliant as a memory in the mind's murk. No wider than an asterisk or the light winking on a radio tower, this organism displaces an ocean of inky water with its determined illumination. Soon, a hat-shaped, blood-red *Crossota norvegica* confronts you. For a moment you watch it cycle through its five-hundred-million-year-old rhythm. All too quickly, it shrinks to the point on a laser and directs you serenely toward the surrounding pitch.

For the space of a heartbeat or a lifetime—it is hard to tell which—there is only absence. Then a host of jewels cut for a king's crown appears in the chiseled blackness. Deep-sea stoplight, one jelly fluoresces green though traffic is absent. A second flashes violet-tintured phosphorescence like the cautionary light atop a bicyclist's handlebar. Plankton streams past in a luminous wake that spells a dissolving sentence of transit. The bell of a larger animal swims close: hold out your finger, and take away a smear of gold slime. The last ornament might be a terrarium doming scarlet Venus flytraps. This jelly does not linger. Tipping on its side, it scoots along the bottom, a lone Christmas light glowing on the frame of an invisible house, a burning ember falling from the top of a Grand Canyon-sized cliff, a far-red light-length

emitted from some cosmic, unfathomable distance.

In the underwater waste, a darkness absolute as the one inside the skull, the medusae blaze incandescent as Revelation. How can they not seem metaphor as much as material? Stars fuse from minerals captured from space's whirling gases, but what prompted a handful of salts and proteins twisting in an ocean current to come to feeling? For a billion years, these eyeless beings have thrived at depths we can only reach cemented in steel and armored in latex. In the depths of space above, though we cannot see it, a nebula named after the jellyfish streams vermilion stars. Ruby in the sea, ruby in the sky, each medusa floats in her inky element.

Do we soar and dive to learn how energies survive such places, or only to know what it is to dwell in the voids that sustain them? Maybe it is the aloofness of the medusae that attracts us, the same way we link our moods to the moon or turn our eyes to the sun despite its dangers. Or perhaps these animals barely altered since the early years of Earth gesture toward our own first days, from which we feel as distanced. Think of all the time we float and idle in obscurity, seasons of sleep that pass unilluminated by so much as a naked lightbulb of thought. Radiant in their reserve, the jellyfish glow like embers in the ocean, reminding us of what we push to the bottom or cannot recover: memory's working a deep sea inside us, our dreams marvelously colored as these creatures and no less strange.

There is something godlike or at least grand about the diver who floats solitary in their penumbra. But isolation eventually burns like the ache for oxygen, even in the self-contained. This is the time to climb. Somersaulting, you turn toward the ocean's ceiling, exhaling in rhythm with your ascent. Halfway to air, the water turns indigo and blood thins enough to reach your limbs. As the pressure retreats, your lungs open like accordions and your closed throat releases. Breaching the surface, you sigh out the end of your long-held breath.

The sun is lower now, the sea too bright to gaze at directly. Light glitters on a breaker and shines on the crumpled bells on the sand. Each wave discards more animals onshore. But the collective flourish; they have done so for millennia.

As if you had Neptune's strength—in mind you can equal his power—pick up the frothing fluid at your feet and tilt the ocean on end until the horizon dividing sea from sky stands vertical. Then wait

in line and wind through a dim, tunneling hall, your hand brushing a wall as you feel your way forward.

Now there is light, as on that first day. The glass holds the weight of water inches from your eyes. It climbs the window above you; in its blue-tintured translucency, a gallery of slow-moving portraits drifts past, luminous as the scarlet copes and green capes Raphael painted on princes. People whisper as they do in cathedrals. *I've never seen anything like this*, a man murmurs. A two-year-old presses her nose to the glass, startling an assembly of minnows. Their eyes roll toward the window but do not return her gaze. *Don't touch*, the mother says reflexively, as green plants wave with the band's passing.

The tank stretches three stories high. It is a place of balletic movement, of lights and darks shifting like leaves in sunlight, of pulsating sunsets contained in pellucid bags. The jellyfish—for such these beings are—flutter in the water like gauzy curtains. A collective *ah!* escapes the crowd as a rock levers itself forward and uncoils into an eel. It slithers along the bottom, a puckered eye the only flaw in its granite face. The diver who enters this atmosphere to feed the fish does not dispel the sense of awe. Tethered to his twisted yellow and orange umbilical cord, he is a curious specimen as brightly colored as the fish.

What faith brings us to worship the calm, cool creatures that file through water untroubled by our stares? Although we could not be more different from these self-reliant beings, we are likewise strangers to ourselves. Organs coil in the body's dark cavity, viscous with salinated fluids. Curiosities pulse and throb inside us, tissues that degrade as soon as they are exposed to air. Gelatinous and dusky, the liver sits above the sea-green gallbladder. Protected by the ribcage, the fish-colored lungs expand and contract. The spleen hides purple and smooth behind the stomach. Thin-skinned and often transparent, we are conceits in and of ourselves, organisms yoking unlike feelings. Death, divorce, a simple parting: we are ripped so easily from our elements. At moments, each of us knows the black disconnection of the diver. And still the carmine bell pulses its ceaseless rhythm, blood-red and brilliant as we drift.

* Adaptions are in order and with apology to: Robert Lowell ("For the Union Dead") and Marianne Moore ("The Fish").

ANNE GOLDMAN's essays have appeared in such venues as *The Georgia Review*, the *Gettysburg Review*, and the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, in addition to the *Southwest Review*. "The Kingdom of the Medusae" is the third essay in a series honoring the elements. The first, "Ode to Energy" (2011) and the second, "Souvenirs of Stone" (2013) also appeared in the *Southwest Review* and were named as notable essays in *Best American Essays 2012* and *Best American Essays 2014* respectively.

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