**The Salted Root.**

There is a woman. Not old enough to be grown, not young enough to be a girl. What her name is, you have no earthly business in knowing. Names give faces to knowledge and once knowledge is synonymous with a face then the person who owns the knowledge owns the face as well.

This woman belongs to the sea. Conceived in an ocean cave, born in a cabin a hairsbreadth from the tide – she belongs to the sea and she loves the sea.

She has the complexion of tide smoothed alabaster, her hair is a sunset of red with flecks of gold, her face cages a smattering of freckles like a flock of gulls over a full, crimson horizon. When she moves, outdoors or in, a clean salty breeze is born between the gaps in her thin, strong limbs.

On the beach there is a rock. On this rock, sunk so deep that it is the root of the foundation on which it stands, is a cross. The edges weathered away by storm and tide, turned black with rot as if purged by some fire in a long forgotten age. How long has the cross been there? Once again, you have no earthly business in knowing.

The outcrop on which the rock stands can be seen from the edge of the cliff – the silhouette, omnipotent upon the landscape, takes its own small section of the sky at sunset and sunrise. To reach the outcrop would require a swimmer of uncommon skill or a boatman of unprecedented caution.

On the edge of the cliff is the castle. A ruin upon where the immovable land succumbs to its own finite nature – giving way to the unstoppable sea. In the castle, upon a high tower with a ruin of a staircase, lives the woman.

She wakes at dawn to witness the cross and the sun touch each other. She retreats at sunset when they kiss one more time. At night, the moon illuminates the sides of the cliffs throwing into sharp relief the fragile crags and cracks that make up the surefooted earth on which we stand.

She ponders this earth below her. After the morning meeting she carefully replaces the steps she removes every night and climbs down to the land surrounding the cliff. There, she picks her way across the grassy surface. She ignores the nettles and thistles – their niggling sting and prick is cooled by the dewy moisture of the morning.

Her dress is small. It needs fixing. It is a pale spring morning blue. There are folds upon folds and tears over all the surfaces. Sometimes the wind will catch her and she will be naked for the duration of the breeze. Skin bare, facing out towards her churning lover – all intimacy exposed by nature with divine permission to be navigated to a place where she can be lusty and beautiful for as long as she can keep the wind in her sails.

Every morning she casts her line into the sea. She stands upon the cliff top further down from the castle. She catches her breakfast and, under the pale chill of new days light – on the same space of burnt earth – she guts, beheads and cooks her meal.

She never really strays far from the castle. She doesn’t like not being able to hear the gentle coax of the tide. From her vantage point she can see the coastal villages sprouting out of the shoreline – stretching off into the distance, as far as the bay runs. The beach stands in front of them, where the earth disintegrates into sand and, even at this distance, she can see the patches that are thick and dark and slick.

She wanders along the coastline every day. She heads into the clusters of tiny beach houses smattered along the tops of the cliffs. Over her shoulder she carries a hemp bag. In this bag she carries essentials. A can opener. Five candles of varying size and colour. A Swiss Army Knife. Strips of seaweed that have been left to dry on a rock until brittle and crisp – wrapped in burlap and tied together with string so as to avoid the pieces breaking and scattering. There are several faded, crumpled letters in the bag, the ink starting to evaporate with time. There is also a book. Leather bound – fragile. Her scripture. Her book of lessons. This books pages are mismatched – different colours, fonts and holy teachings collected over years, delicately held in an almost coherent narrative of her own creation by two interwoven pieces of twine. Sand folded into the space between the pages, salt crystallized on the inside after being exposed the ocean spray as she huddled on the beach one warm day to organise and bind the tome.

In the gatherings she will explore a house a day. They are small, the frames wooden and musty, some of them are starting to decay slightly. All painted in varying shades of the seaside, now started to flake and sprinkle across the grass in a pale imitation of snow. The houses contain more books. Some will be added to her collage of faith, others will be added to the bag, read and then added to one of the piles that decorate her home. In the houses she finds tinned goods. Sometimes she opens them with her tin opener and eats them there. Other times she saves them for later – enjoying them with a new, freshly caught fish.

Every day requires her to go further and further away from the tower. Today, she has reached the final hut of the final group. She enters the house her usual way – she uses one of the multitude of tools on her army knife to crack its rusted, disused lock. She slips in lithely and creeps on her bare feet around the building. Then she picks the place apart. She finds the things she wants. Then she begins the real task. She finds the valuables – jewellery, photos (faded now), children’s toys, board games, binoculars, beachcombing tools – and arranges them around each other in the front room. Around the shrine she will place the five candles. Above the shrine, whatever thing that bares a closest resemblance to a family portrait will be pinned.

She will offer the shrine worship. She will pray for the family whose memory provoked the erection of this tiny monument. Then she will take one of the candles and light the family portrait aflame. She will leave the cabin. Sometimes the cabin will burn down. Sometimes it won’t. Once she stood at the door to see what would happen if she waited. Nothing. She stood outside, wanting the house to crumble and crush the beings within, but it did not fall. The shrine was more prayer than pyre and so it was seen fit to let this one be.

Today there was no scuttle. No fire. The final piece of the purge passed without notable incident.

She walks out, further than she has ever been, and stands at the end of the of the cliff face. She stares at an unfamiliar patch on her beloved ocean. The spray here doesn’t feel as alien as she thought it would. She enjoys the moment, reaching the peak.

She begins her walk back home. She takes the beach route. The whole way she walks with her feet being washed by the tiny white horses charging toward the shore. The air around her is warm, the breeze from the sea is chilly but pleasant. She drinks in the blue grey scent and she muses over her time here. She thinks on her mission and its completion. She thinks of the families saved and the families she cannot comprehend. She stands at the end of lands reach and turns away from the ocean. She looks out at the dirt and rock and sees that, although its reach isn’t as inescapable as the waters, it is still bigger than she will ever see.

She reaches the tower just before the sunset. No time to catch a new fish and enjoy it with the spoils that she salvaged today. She resigns herself to watching the sun and cross meet, picking at the strips of seaweed packed into her bag. Exhausted. Ten slabs of stone that are the steps she ritualistically removes stand at the entrance to her tower room. They are marked red from bloody, inexperienced and un-calloused hands ripping them from their root like rotten teeth.

At night she lays in her bed and stares upwards. If the night is clear she pulls back the tarpaulin she uses for shelter and looks up at the clear skies. Some nights she can sense that They are here. Gathered airlessly at the bottom, gazing up towards the sky along with her in the only moment of community she now shares with Them. But They will never reach her. They don’t know of her existence but still They call to her with their magnified, heretic voices – speaking false prophesies of Their tarnished histories and Their old, decrepit, impotent gods. They too, have no names.

Some nights, and this is such a night, the tides rushes in much farther than usual. It brings animals with it. She can hear all. The frenzied call of the seals as they are smashed against rocks and the cry of gulls circling above, ready to excavate the carcasses with precision at a moment’s notice.

The next day she stands vigil for the animals who weren’t worthy in eyes of nature. Not for holy reasons or unselfish penance. On these days she balances on the edge of the parapets and lets whatever hand of whatever god it is that controls the wind blow her dress out behind her and she imagines Them watching a power beyond comprehension explore her body with warm, airy fingers, and she will stand with limbs apart and shudder and shake and scream as coral splashes the alabaster and she gains a release from her existence for a short while and she will open her eyes after nature explores her own shifting topography and she will see the beauty and feel that enduring lightness of being that she sometimes longs for and she knows that she deserves to feel this and see this – like a beacon of humanity upon the highest point of her home which becomes a force beyond the shade of everything that inhabits the land, and so she rules by the right of her flowered femininity.

After her communion she makes use of the inner fire that she herself stoked and leaves her tower and walks with bold ferociousness into the caves that line the shore. There, having now finished her witch hunt, she sets about finishing her other work. Amongst rock and crab and the cold dregs of high tide she immortalises herself. Like the first humans, painting and scoring the rocks until it is a mural to herself. She gauges pieces out into the cave as old as the earth and imprints herself into the land. She finishes this with a frenzy, reaching the end of the tasks imposed upon her.

On her way back she collects driftwood. She builds three piles upon the beach and lights each one on fire, covering the beach and the air with a dark smokiness.

She writes prayers in the sand and gallops around the pyres, treading the tide, singing for joy and absolution and twirling like a child of a pagan forest that she has never seen before, walking into the water and cleansing herself with salted ablution. She calls for forgiveness for Father and Mother and Brother and their heavenly journeys.

She treads back to the tower and watches the fires on the beach slowly succumb to the inexorable lull of the tide.

She has a friend that she made herself. A doll – crafted by her able hands at an infant age. It is stuffed with the things you would expect a doll to be stuffed with. It doesn’t feel totally full, but it is not totally hollow. She has filled it with more than those things. To her the doll is everything. The doll is not confined. The doll fills whatever purpose she desires. A guardian, confidant, friend and lover. The doll is all that is and never will be. Into it she pours herself and the ritual of being continues.

The next morning she walks further down the cliff, leading towards the ancient barrows and empty, crumbling beach huts, to the cabin where she was born and raised. The roof scooped out by explosion, cleansing the family of their shelter. The ragged edges of the roof look like the edges of the cross and the grass is fresh black and smells burnt like her favourite cooking spot. She sits there with the Doll. Her friend. And she meditates on what has become of the earth.

She talks of reaching the cross one day. She tells her confidant one day we shall reach it and when we do it shall all be as it was meant to be.

Today the wind is too cold. The tarpaulin is pulled over, shielding the beauty of her skylight and closing her stone world in around her. Underneath she can hear Them laughing. They are here early today. Whispering to each other, spooking each other with their false tales and repeated histories.

She tries to receive communion to lighten the load but she cannot – the winds rake at delicate areas with needle pointed nails. Her lover tries but it isn’t the same as being buoyed up by the divine.

From this position she can see the cross, it looks like a signpost. In the half light of a chilly night the top section cannot be seen – just two points aimed in two polarising directions. She knows what the destinations must be but she cannot think of how to gain passage to her preferred haven. She knows that the rock is the port in which her sail boat is anchored and it is this boat that will lift her from the coloured, metal world.

She remains on the parapet, resisting the icy beckon of the wind, and imagines what she will do when she reaches the rock. Will she strike out foolishly and sink to the depths of the deep sunk roots that mark the spot of passage? She doesn’t think so.

She imagines nailing herself to it. Feet first, then the left hand and then she will grip tightly with the right. Then she will wait for the day when the sea deems her penance worthy and breaks the cross clean from its stone home and carries it and its one passenger out to the open water – smothering them in blue and clear shades while white flecks of salt coat shin, hands and dress, sticking the eyelids shut and crusting over them like a nautical sandman. After long enough the boat and passenger would be a pure, angelic white. Adrift and unmoving, awaiting acceptance. Soon the salt will crust thick and weigh heavy and she will sink slowly, gradually, into the blue depths. There is no wind or air – only a compressing crush that cleanses – absolving all and taking all. From there a current will take her and she will awake on a shore not dissimilar to the one she embarked from, but the sands aren’t slicked over and the air is always warm.

Her task is fulfilled. She knows it is time. She climbs down from the top of the top as They are leaving. She slips past their huddled mass as quietly as she can and takes the cliff path down to the beach.

She stands at the waters entrance. She looks at the waves and their siren song beckons her out like the sailors Father told her about in his false stories. The sun and cross are meeting for their second stolen encounter of the day but now she stands at their level. Neither above or below them, observer or participant. She stands as their equal and the wind doesn’t encourage her. She dips her toes into the cold north and sheds the dress of her girlhood onto the sand for Them to have. On top of the dress she rests her book of teachings. Her manifesto. They are running down the path, their lights are hellish and white and a flashing blue sits atop the stone surface. They are calling for her, pleading for her to come with them and follow Their path into a world of heretics with no mystery or wonder at the forces beyond our understanding – only sacrificial priests in white. She prays for them.

From the tower her lover and friend and keeper watches, sat on the parapet. It is hollow now – a vessel. It is still stuffed with the things you would expect a doll to be stuffed with, but it has lost the things that made it transcendent which are now seething and flowing in her mind.

She strikes out towards the rock without skill. She relishes the newness of the night water over her flushed, pinkish pale skin. Naked and unencumbered she begins her strides to salvation.