

Phase shift

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IT WAS THE SEA. Long pause...it was the sea that woke him, only his awakening was more like an ending than a beginning. Had it not been the words, *it was the sea*, forming in his mind that forced recognition? Anyway, that turgid foam lapping nearby was not sea-coloured.

It was the sea. How long had that pause been? He had always loved the sea. His key-ring said, *Pisceans. Fond of water, kind to animals. Compassionate. Gentle. Creative.*

He lay flat on the shore, seemingly at ease, certainly without pain, and yet something was different. He was aware of the smooth wetness of the sand below him, but something about his posture was strangely new. It evoked a memory. He was waking up in bed with an arm that was still asleep, having to move it with his other arm: that curious feeling, half whimsy, half below the surface fear, that it would never function again. Only now it was as though his mind was still asleep. He remembered dreaming, trying to assuage thirst, greedily reaching out for the water by his bedside, grabbing the glass, actually feeling its cool surface, drinking – but without satisfaction. Compared to how he felt now, those dreams were reality.

He knew something was there with him. But it would have to wait.

The sounds of the non-sea unfurled like sails. Part of his brain suggested, in an almost dilettante way, that the soft hiss and the suck back of the water were pitched too high. No, not too high. Were pitched differently. But to what? He was aware of something rich like heat on his back, and it felt good. He tried to move his head to look up at the sun, but somehow his muscles reacted in an independent way.

He was looking not up but straight ahead, to a cluster of reeds. He had to alter focus to bring it sharp into view. The delicate weave of its grass wavered gently in an unfelt wind.

Yes, he remembered that key-ring. If not much else. It seemed important to cling to it. He could see himself reaching into his jacket pocket for it, comfort zones, keys jingling reassuringly with the movement. The hand reaches out, one key extended. A fit. It turns...but there's only blackness.

He let the reeds blur and the sea, moving idly like oil, reasserted itself. A cry of desire, sharp as vision, came from above. Two birds moved into frame. Light pressed down on the water like a loom and he was caught in a grid-square with the sea roaring gently before him. And in the next square, something was with him. It was calling his attention so insidiously that he often forgot it altogether. But when he did remember it, as now, he felt for some reason that it was better to resist it. Long, long pause....

He tried to marshal his thoughts. There were questions he should be asking. Why was he here? But it triggered no reaction in his mind. It was like one of those words in a foreign language when you thought you were fluent: a total blank out of the blue. (Foreign language?) Okay, then: what was he doing yesterday? Or last week? Where should he be, if not here? Why this

unreachable feeling? He felt he should get up and walk away, but he felt also that it was right to be lying here, ticking away the surf time.

Of course, the blackness was because the light was off in the hallway. He was aware of himself and yet not aware, walking noiselessly to the switches and turning one on carelessly. Still that claustrophobic grey remained. He walked into a room and slumped into a seat, his body moulding into its curves. Relaxation. Before him, a flickering screen. From outside, with that miniature sense of suffocation again, he peered into his own face and back to the blank screen. Both gave out nothing and reflected nothing back.

Then he was running out of the room and grabbing the switch in the hallway. It seemed to take all his strength, sweat torrenting from his skin, as though it were not designed for him. But he dragged it down with a great effort and sweet light leapt echoing around the hallway. He fell awkwardly into it. There didn't seem enough room between doorway and stairs for him and he wanted to get out, to be free.

But after a long time of lying, sweat drying, he felt better. The hall was running with sunlight. The door had just opened and he saw himself walking in. He set down a briefcase and parcels. He peered into his own face and it was alive. It was a joy just to see it. Then he walked into the front room, moving listlessly. Was he waiting for someone? He sat down on the window-seat and stared down the empty street.

But the inactivity of the picture snapped him like elastic back to the shore, with the intenseness of the sand and the pulse of the waves. Why was his field of vision so limited? Suddenly bold and ready, he tried to turn towards whatever it was that waited for him, but he lost muscle control and found himself on his back. Three masses of heat and light, hot and black to his eyes, rushed down on him. He tried to shut his eyes and for a moment seemed to succeed. He could feel the pleasure of his eyelids clamped shut, wrinkled closed, shutting out that remorseless tide of pain. But then he knew that his eyes hadn't closed. It was the glass of water all over again. He wanted to shield his eyes with his hands, and again for a moment he saw those famous fingers (artist's hands?), the most familiar sight in his universe, come shooting up to shut out the terrible sky. But they were gone and a silent cry tore from inside him like a ball bouncing in a confined space. Tears welled up. He could feel them vaporising, could see steam rising, closing off his view...and then, magnificently, coolness like a silk sheet was draped over him and the heat vanished.

He opened the door. The dark shapes were confusing, harsh light leaping through leaks in their joint outline. But this was no good. It was remote. Why was he lying on the floor, anyway? And then, as though nothing had changed, he was inside. He looked down and felt his fingers, clasping and unclasping his hands. Sweat poured from his hairline. A lyric suddenly attained immediacy:

*Dreaming of the pleasure I'm gonna have,
Watching your hairline recede my vain darling.*

He held her cheeky cheeks with fingers that seemed on fire. He looked into her dancing eyes and almost lost himself again in their serene coolness. Freckles like a constellation, uneasily familiar, were burnt over her face but he ignored them and lowered his mouth to kiss her and receive her kiss. His eyes already closed, desperate suddenly for security. He heard her soft chuckle

and the plump of her bags as she dropped them, in parody of the great Hollywood romance, and then....

Then, yes, he remembered it now, the warm coolness of her lips that caught his tongue like tangerine pillows, as it was on the beach (what beach?), and his fingers spread a lattice over her back, feeling the soft grain of her shirt and its received warmth, drawing him into her. The kiss which had been designed as a blockbuster had developed a will of its own as the gentlest possible caress, and he could feel tears pouring down his face although his cheeks remained dry.

"Don't leave me," he breathed, as they moved apart.

"I've only just arrived," she joked, sensing something.

They moved into the room with the window-seat where he had waited before (for her?). The tape they played was the Joni Mitchell he had heard in his head. He took a childlike pleasure in pressing the eject button on his cassette deck and watching the slowness of the damped door opening. How was it he had nothing like this? he wondered.

She said, "Remember those days?"

He drew the cork with a wrench, suddenly startled by the fruit of the bouquet. He said, "I remember everything, even the way that shirt unbuttons," and his fingers moved teasingly to the back of her neck and unclasped the hook.

And she said, "Oh, Mr Fortescue, not here in the office," while her trim fingers moved to his own shirt.

His face was close in to hers, her eyes full, a kind of heavy bloom of acceptance and ease, and he smiled a smile of the nostalgia of late summer evenings at the untrembling of that ease. As she said, it was different at the start. But that fumbling couldn't be compared to this knowledge.

As his fingers twirled open her buttons in order, soft music and their laughter around them, he looked up at her face again, that golden mane flowing over her eyes as she moved, laughing.

She whispered, "Bloody Pisceans," and fixed him suddenly with a coquettish look, but the suddenness threw him off balance somehow; those eyes he had longed for were threatening, her teeth were everywhere: where was that softness he wanted? Her face seemed savagely broken in two by that straight nose. He could feel rivulets of sweat between his shirt and his back as he laughed nervously and caught up his wine, spilling some, drinking with eyes closed. That was better. He wiped his palms against his jeans and gently slipped his hand inside her shirt. For a moment, her skin seemed strangely smooth, clammy even, but even as that thought crossed his mind he could feel the bare skin yield to the warm and luscious pelt he wanted. He opened his eyes and saw the rich tawny hair contouring her smooth shape, those disfiguring curves gone. He sank his hands and face into the pelt with a sigh of abandonment, a sigh of relinquishing.

He opened his eyes, as he had expected, to the matt sands throwing back heat and light into his face. It felt good. He could move a little now. From the corner of his eyes he could see a cluster of shadows. He half knew what was behind them, but instead of left he turned right, moving towards the sea.

As though powered by those three engines above him, he could move now, awkwardly at first, his face often nearly precipitated into the hard wall of the wet sand. But then the gentle wave flashed over him and he launched

forward, without effort. It was a flying, a twisting, a soaring. It was the sea, that woke him from his great slumbers and greater pauses and cracked his eyes wide open. He rifled through shifting non-water that streamed apart like curtains for his passage. He curvetted. He sang praises. He didn't ask to what he sang.

But there was a pause, or an ecstasy, and there he was on the beach again, now two lights above him, fewer clusters of shadows and a pleasant dimness. He felt renewed, and bolder. He turned his head.

Again, for an ageless moment, he could not move as his clumsy limbs fought with each other and with the sand in a seizure of panic. That face, beyond savage, seemed to bear down, the great mouth engulfing him...but after another long pause he realised that it retained its position. It saw him but (it?) seemed uninterested. Even so, he could hardly look at that ragged flesh which hung rapidly around the red eyes, or the ugly horn like a malignant growth, or those powerful elephantine flippers. Still unable to move, he tried at least to turn his head away. That was how he caught sight of the flippers beneath his own gargantuan body. His eyes seemed to flip up and out of his mind at that, out over the steaming waters and the merciless suns, his brain cracked like an old plaster cast. The agony of, for a moment, feeling those fingers, actually grasping or caressing something, and then having them meld and merge below him into these useless affronts of glistening pelt.

When he regained consciousness it was brighter, but their positions hadn't changed. Still the great shape dwarfed him. For long periods now he dared to look into those huge red eyes, dark like the suns. The sea struck the sand with soft mallet blows. Was that sadness in those unseeing eyes, was it unsayable distances? Unaccountably he found himself feeling sad also, or was it nostalgia, the nostalgia of late summer evenings that never seemed to die.

She was running along the wet rise of the shore, half in, half out of the water. Soothing continuous music played from their radio. She was a black cut-out waving to him. He loved those undisguisable curves.

"Call yourself a Piscean?" she shouted, her voice blown on the light breeze.

He laughed and ran over to her as the blackness of her shape acknowledged colour. Her remote blue eyes laughed silently at him from the deep brown of her face. He felt intensely the thrilling shock of her heavy wet arm around his dry waist. He was there. He was really there. He felt exquisitely the soft mallet blows of her mouth on his, falling and falling, at first in mockery, later with the single-minded purpose that always won in the end.

They walked back up the shore with the white riders falling behind them like a cortege. The (single?) sun built up layers on their backs over their linking arms. He was suddenly sharply hungry. They lifted a hamper from the back of the car, the metal of its frame unbearable. They threw themselves down by the towels.

He bit into the sandwich. With the wind in his face it had an almost wild taste. He bit into her shoulder. She bit his fleshy forearm. They laughed.

"Let's stay here forever," she said. They watched each other's eyes like cats over their French wine.

It was 2:42. He leaned up on his elbow to see over her and the digital clock held up the time solemnly. He could feel the rise and fall of the single

sheet as he lay down again on his back. Why had he awoken? He felt the little finger of his left hand trace her profile with a touch like a falling leaf. The back of his fingernail tremulously touched her closed eyelid. Outside, the eternal heartbeat of the waves. He raised the sheet to watch her sleep. The movement of her breasts caught his eye: she seemed trusting and helpless.

But then, a timeless pause, and sweat was breaking like waves over him. Her body suddenly seemed angular and jagged to him, her skin somehow plucked and raw. An involuntary retch seized him. Quickly he let the sheet fall. Even as it settled in lazy readjustment he could feel the threat within subsiding. Contentment flowed over him as he half-closed his eyes and watched her camouflaged by the cotton in the blotchy moonlight. Something about her like that was infinitely right. It was right.

He lay watching her for a long time, then without a sound he rose, laying the sheet back over the bed as he slid upwards. He padded over the bare boards towards the mirror that hung near the doorway. With his hand on the door handle he stood naked, moved for a second without quite knowing why by the expression on the unfamiliar face reflected back. Without looking round at the softly sleeping form but retaining the image deep in his brain, he jogged gently into the warm yet bracing breeze towards those rolling grey flecked waves.

Sharply and irresistibly alive, he burst into a world of whirling colour and shade as his shape twirled and joyed through the waters. Nourishment flowed into him. He was sharply hungry, and this time he could really eat. Rocks swept past him, their surfaces frothily alive. He felt almost completely at ease: only the faint after-image of something like a not-quite-remembered dream twinkled for a moment. But, like that dream which rises towards the surface and disappears, it vanished quickly and he floated in a slow hedonistic incline, his mind all warmth and pleasure.

He lay basking. The waters swept the shore. Ahead of him lay that beautiful shape. The warm red of the eyes saw him now. She communed: *You are back. You were out long.*

He looked around him with a sense of being. It was noon. Along the shoreline were others he recognised, in groups much like his own. He gloried as his head moved smoothly upwards in the familiar warmth of the suns. He communed himself, but the feeling of satisfaction took him by surprise, so he sent only the prosaic: *Was I?*

With an almost perceptible change of tone, she continued: *You are not ready. Too young. I warned.*

The parent in him agreed. But the child sparked a rush of incoherent indignant protest which would have been more forceful but for his tiredness. What he wanted far more than upholding his rights was security, as he moved, always awkwardly on land, towards her. Perhaps she sensed in the fizzling out of his squalls a grudging acceptance of her view, for she pulled him contentedly to her rich and tawny pelt, and her horn smoothed softly his own glistening body.