

The Fourth River

A publication of the Chatham University MFA in Creative Writing Programs

Spring 2023



D.W. Ardern

FAR OUT ON THE COVE with its ancient rocks like a mythic land that emerges and recedes with the appetites of the sea, the boys are chasing the tide. They are barefoot, laughing in the joy of their wildness. They scramble with calloused soles and toes over sharp crags, slippery seaweed hair, barnacle teeth. One, two, three, they scale the cliffs and dive off, taunting the waves as the many mouths crest, froth, and crash.

This is the game they played. Who's strongest, who's cleverest, who's bravest? Jack, Miles, and Will with driftwood spears, kelp sashes, seaweed crowns, gull feathers in their wet hair. At low tide, they'd journey out along the cove for hours to its farthest point—explorers of the savage rocks that seemed to recast themselves with every new tide—then race home before the land disappeared beneath their feet.

The seagulls, however, are not amused by the laughter, winging out with an annoyed caw whenever the wild ones come running in their regalia of the sea. The fish whisper under the waves, gossiping. The crabs scuttle under rocks.

Will leaps off a cliff with a splash and paddles out to a jagged peak around which seafoam swirls. He likes to be alone sometimes, sitting on a ledge with his legs in the cold water or laying out in reverent surrender to the sun and wind and salt and wave.

Jack climbs up the seaweed-covered boulders, the layered slate glossed with algae, onto the lichened granite, finding new handholds in the stone to pull himself higher and higher. He takes a broad survey of the cliffs stretching toward shore, the bridge of rocks slowly being reclaimed by the rising tide. There's a nagging thought that maybe he and his friends have stayed out too long this time.

Miles is knee-deep in a tidepool with his pants rolled up. He lurches an arm into the water like a diving loon and scoops out a giant crab from under a boulder veiled with bulbous yellow-green strands. His hands are hardly big enough to pinch its shell by the forefinger and thumb. The crab's spindly legs wriggle, its huge claws snapping at this god or monster who's disturbed its subterranean slumber.

"Found another one!" Miles grins.

Jack climbs down to inspect the creature. He touches its sun-scorched armor, its protuberant eyes jangling in terror. There's another game that Miles likes to play next. It sickens Jack every time to watch the crabs desperately try to outrun their brutal fate, damned by these mischievous gods that show no mercy—crushing them and leaving them, alive and twitching, to be pecked apart by gulls.

Jack snatches the crab and throws it back into the sea.

"Hey, that was mine." Miles says.

"No, it wasn't," he says. "It belongs—"

Miles shoves him. Jack slips on the seaweed and falls, slicing his knee on the barnacles. The bite is deep, saltwater stings the wound. He springs up and pushes Miles, astonished by his force and how helpless his friend looks as he skids and tumbles off into the water.

Jack rushes to the edge. Waves crash against the ancient rocks—raking periwinkles and pebble stones from the higher plateaus, dragging them too into the depths below.

Beneath the shimmer of liquid blue sky, many eyes watch the boy flail underwater, his seaweed crown and feathers scattering with bits of kelp and silt. The whispering fish, darting in and out of the crevices, are curious but wary of the driftwood spear he still clutches like a scepter. The seaweed lightly tangles his calves, slowing the depth's pull, delighting in the smoothness of his skin, this wild little animal now at the mercy of the sea. Miles struggles against the weight of water. He has no way of knowing

how deep he is. He can't even open his eyes long enough to know which way the surface is or whether he's kicking back up toward the rocky cove or farther out to sea. Then he feels the first pinch. Then another and another, grabbing and tearing at the fabric of his pants, dragging him downward. He screams and fluid fills his lungs as his feet touch sand and for a moment in the delirium before it all goes fuzzy, he sees them—their countless claws tugging at his body like a toy.

From a cave at the bottom of the sea, the beautiful one shows its face for the first time in many moons. Its many bulbous mouths and shining eyes, its tentacles and fluorescent gills, its barnacled patchwork shell. Horrid perhaps to a human, but to the creatures of the sea it is a divine reflection of everything under the waves. The crabs let go and form a circle around the boy floating there like a loose strand of kelp. They wait on the beautiful one for its judgment. It opens its many eyes and many mouths, and speaks.

—

Churning in the waves among the seaweed hair, Jack reaches out into the water and grabs his friend's arm, surprised by the miracle of it, how his body suddenly bobbed up as if spat out by the sea. He pulls Miles onto the rock ledge, then drags him farther up, safely out of sea spray. He slaps his face to wake him, breathes into him, presses down on his bloated stomach. Finally, Miles chokes and spits up water. He gasps for air, the seagulls cawing in circles overhead.

Miles sits at the edge of the rock, peering down into the deep blue shadows. Jack pats his friend's back as he empties his liquid lungs and breathes, breathes, breathes.

Will, surfacing from a nap in the afternoon sun, stands up on a half-submerged crag that seems as if it's drifted out from the cove.

"Hey guys!" he shouts. "Tide's coming in fast. I think maybe we should head home?"

Jack glances out across the waves at Will, squinting into the

bright sun as it flares across the water with its reflections and its illusions,
as the sea's jeweled hues shift with the shimmer of scales, thousands and
thousands of messengers fanning out around them like an underwater
ring of fire.