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## Sea, Swallow Me

Craig Laurance Gidney

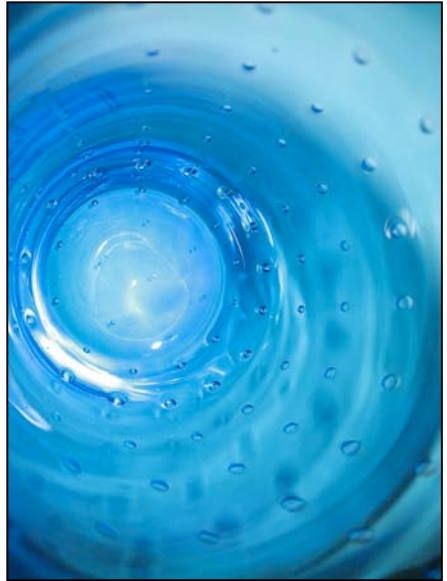
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The island hated him.

Jed could feel it as he walked down the empty street. A ghost town spread out before him. Houses with rickety, water-eaten planks and warped shingles, with broken glass or torn plastic where windows were. The street was covered with sand, jeweled with glass. The metal of a derelict car glinted as the heat vacuumed. Was there electricity in these houses? Running water?

A Doberman lunged against an unstable fence, the barks of rage as sudden and relentless as machine gun fire. Jed jumped back, startled. He saw the tan and lewd underside of the dog, and its dangling genitalia. He laughed, out of fear or embarrassment.

The guidebooks had specifically warned tourists to avoid this section of town of La Mer Vert, unofficially called La Merde. It was a shantytown, with houses in ill repair, patched with corrugated tin. He could feel sullen eyes on him. They hid in the shade of the silent houses. Jed shivered, in spite of the heat. Was the search for local color worth



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this feeling? This morning, he'd woken up in his hotel room. A gentle zephyr stirred the filmy curtains. The walls of the room were nautilus pink and touched with painterly strokes of morning sunlight. The generic painting above his bed showed a riotous marketplace scene. He heard gulls, children, and steel drums. It was horrible. The resort feel was starting to grate on him. Jed liked his vacation with a little bit of bite. One more fruit-filled, alcoholic drink, and he'd puke. But now that he was here, he was having second thoughts. If he were killed here, who would find him? The killers would probably just throw him in the sea, to be nibbled by fish and covered by algae.

The street ended abruptly, quashing his morbid thoughts. There was a cul de sac, and then, the beach. The scene took his breath away. Hidden behind this raggedy, dangerous street was one of the most beautiful beaches he'd ever seen. The sand was white and soft as powdered sugar. Off to the left, dunes undulated, with thin fingers of grass poking out of them. The ocean water was like a liquid geode. Smashed sapphire was shot through with veins of emerald and milky opal. The horizon was empty, no cirrus, no birds, just endless blue. Jed kicked off his sandals, and stepped onto the sand, entranced. The glimmering water beckoned. Salt air tickled his nose. Why does it glow like that? He thought. It was as if there was a sun *under* the water. When he reached the wet lip of land where the tide kissed it, he looked down. The water was clear, and all those colors simultaneously. Something burned under his breastbone. It was joy, bright as the phantom sun under the water. He'd made the right decision, coming here.

Jed stepped in the water, which was mercifully warm. He waded out, until the tide licked his knees. He saw shells and sand dollars in the silt floor. The wet sand oozed between his toes, holding him there. He closed his eyes. I am the only imperfect thing here, he thought. But that didn't matter. He forgot about the raised continent of the keloid on his face, and his ashy skin and too-thin body. If he could only be like this forever.

He stood there for a while, and lost track of time. So he wasn't really sure when he heard the singing begin. It seemed to evolve out of the breeze and the sighing surf. Voices, soft and vaporous as sea mist, rose near him, and moved away. He turned away from the horizon, blue upon green-blue, and faced the shore. White and blue and black moved further away from him, a singing congregation of men and women. They wore linen suits and dresses, all of them blindingly white. The women had headscarves of navy blue. They looked clean, their brown skins gleaming. The crowd moved in nimble, ghost-light steps down the beach. They ignored him; he was utterly irrelevant. He might have been a rock in the sea, or a discarded buoy. Dark children wove in and out of the group of sixty, with orderly, mannered chaos. Some of the men at the back dragged wagons behind them. The wagons were filled with all sorts of things: white flowers, bottles with sheets of paper stuffed inside, perfect shells, and food. The chorus was steady, with the men's voices keening, and the women's voices reedy. Jed couldn't understand the language they were singing in. St. Sebastian had a notoriously difficult pidgin, old English mixed with colonial French and seasoned with an accent that had no precedent. He followed their subdued yet joyful progress down the white beach.

Back home in D.C., he'd witnessed an Easter parade held by the Ethiopian congregation that worshipped in the church behind his basement apartment. They marched down the alley like this group, led by priests that looked like life-sized black chess pieces. He recalled the decorated umbrellas, palm leaves and vibrant clothing—it was very much like this current group. But there was different feeling, here. The Ethiopians had shared a communal happiness; it was very much a celebration. These people in blue and white were becalmed, as if they were under a spell. They marched and sang toward the inevitable, rather than towards salvation and reward. It was eerie.

Maybe I'm reading too much into this, he thought. He moved out of the water, and followed them, at a discreet distance. Curiosity got the better of him. No one looked around; they all faced forward, even the

children. The one baby, facing backwards and resting on his mother's shoulder, was sound asleep. They walked adjacent to the shoreline, and scarcely seemed to notice it. Every now and then, Jed would look to the Atlantic, and notice a change. Silver water became blue, then brown then green. Once, he saw the grey-silver flash of a pod of porpoises, arcing in the water. Another time, a bird of prey hovered over a spot. Every time he paused to look seaward, he found that the group had moved further ahead than he thought possible. Oddly enough, he could hear their voices all the same—their sound did not diminish. The fourth time he was distracted by the activity on the water, he resolved to follow them, and ignore the periphery.

Jed settled into their gait. He focused on their linen-covered backs, and their dark necks. The women's hips swiveled and bopped. They were rounded, and breasts were full. They were totemic, living sculptures, Black Madonnas. The men were mostly slender. A few of them were shirtless, with firmly muscled backs and buttocks that slid underneath pants with ease and grace. Stomp, sway, sing—Jed found that he was singing their song, even if he didn't understand the words. The melody just got into his blood, like an infection.

Finally, they stopped. Jed stopped as well, wishing that there was a dune or something that he could hide behind. They seemed intent on what they were doing; maybe they wouldn't notice him blatantly looking at them. Still, he felt like he was invading their privacy. Even so, he felt no strong urge to move. Presently, the group formed a semi-circle, a crescent of blue, white and brown at the lip of the ocean. Their voices rose, and were accompanied by percussive instruments and handclaps. Then, one by one, they walked to the laden wagon to their left, and dropped the trinkets into the water. Bottles, beads, feathers, coins, and other things were laid out on the shoreline, and devoured by the incoming breakers. From where he stood, it looked like the offerings disappeared. He saw a wreath of flowers drift on the wrinkled surface of the water. They gleamed against the kaleidoscopic water as they floated slowly towards the horizon. Jed imagined one of the porpoises

leaping through the hoop of white blossoms. When the last offering went to the water, the music stopped abruptly.

He heard the distant screech of seagulls. Then silence.

A figure in a long robe of blue stepped out of the crescent of gathered people, and stood facing them, its back to the water. The being was long limbed with hair cut close to its skull. It was male, but so old that the maleness of the features had eroded like stone. The priest was beyond gender. He glanced over his flock, and saw Jed lurking. The ageless gaze captured him, held him momentarily, and released him. Jed's keloid itched and burned. Perhaps the salt air irritated it.

The priest spoke to his congregation. The words flowed out like the tide. Its voice was musical and slightly feminine. The patois of St. Sebastian rippled over his ears. Jed supposed it was a sermon of some kind. But who were these people worshipping? There were vague rumors of cults in the island, where people followed African rituals—the guidebook had mentioned obeah and Voudun. But the worship was swathed in mystery. The priest, however, did not seem to be bothered by his presence. He raised his arms and stretched them out. In response, the audience began to chant and sing. They stood still—even the formerly restless children—and sang a simple song that increased in tempo and velocity slowly. Jed couldn't make out the whether it was in French or Spanish—or some older, pre-colonial tongue. The priest conducted them, as if they were instruments in an orchestra. One word was repeated, over and over. It rose and separated from the flow of voices: Olo Kun.

There was a magic about all words that began with the letter O. It was something that Jed had felt as a child when he was first learning to read. It was a silly thing, but the feeling never left him. Owl and opal and Orion were beautiful words. O was the letter that was an endless circle, that surrounded a hole. It was geometric and mysterious, mystical and mathematical, the cousin to 0, the number that signified nothing. He found himself saying the word with the group of worshipers.

The voices and their rhythms had insinuated themselves into him, into his blood:

*Syllable, sibilance, Olokun...*

*Beat, beat, Olokun...*

*Sigh, bird's cry, Olokun...*

*Serpent words, serpent sun, Olokun...*

Olokun...Olokun...Olokun...

The space between the magic word got smaller and smaller. Soon there was no word, but Olokun. A word that meant everything. A word that meant sea and sky and sand. A word that was also a name, a name that meant endless and terrifying blue...

The name came faster and faster, darker and darker, cresting waves of human voices. The voices of the congregation, the bizarre priest(ess), and, indeed, his voice mimicked the tug and pull of the surf and the darker currents. They stood on the lip of the ocean, calling for the he, or she, or it.

And It, or She, or He came.

O, or Zero is magic, because it holds emptiness. It defines space, and captures it. What lives in the center of Zero, or O?

A woman broke free of the crescent of people (half of O). She was an explosion, given human form. She screamed, and her eyes rolled back into head. She staggered in paroxysm for a few steps, before she fell to the ground. She could have been something spit up by the sea. The semicircle dispersed.

It was second nature, really, him running down to where she had fallen. Last summer's stint as an EMT had prepared him for all sudden medical episodes. It was essential that he act, and soon. The first few moments of an accident were crucial. The audience had parted and let him through. He dropped to his knees, and reached for her slack arm that poked out of her robes' sleeve.

"Non," said a strange, high-pitched voice. Jed looked up, into the eyes of the priest. He towered over him. His gaze was stern, and hawk-like. Jed was reminded of a vulture. The priest's neck was impossibly

long, and Jed noticed the long, yellow nails on his ancient, veiny hands. For a moment Jed thought of the strange, feminine bird creatures in the movie *The Dark Crystal*.

“I am an EMT—a doctor,” he said, even though it wasn’t quite true. He wasn’t a doctor *yet*. Med school started in the fall. “I can help.”

The priest shook his head. “Non. You mustn’t touch her. She not sick.”

The woman’s mouth was open. A pool of drool had formed in the corner of her lip. Her eyelids fluttered.

Jed repeated himself: “I can help her,” and took her thin, brittle wrist in his hand.

He was burned. His keloid flared and throbbed—an island of pain on the side of his face. He saw endless blue, cut through with emerald, the bottom of a boat, shoals of fish. He jumped back, as if he had been shocked. The inert woman jerked back to life. 10,000 volts thrummed through her invisibly. Her jaws quivered, and her eyes flew open. Jed was on the sand, rubbing his keloid. He saw for the briefest moment the woman’s eyes.

They were blue, a rich, impossible color. She had no whites in her eyes—they were just twin ovals of blue. He saw movement in them—tiny daggers of sunlight. Or fish?

Before he could look further, she stood up. But *stood* implied a control of her body, the obeying of anatomy and physical reality. No, she did not stand up. She sprung up with such exuberant fluidity, it was as if her bones were malleable as clay. She was a short woman, perhaps 5’4, and yet she loomed over him. And it wasn’t just that he was on the ground. Maybe the rest of the world shrank, in response to her.

The first spasm of her body had Jed scrambling off his ass. He moved back to join the circle that had formed around the woman. She began to shudder, as if she had just caught a sudden chill. And then, she started dancing, if such chaotic movement could be called dancing. It was simultaneously robotic and graceful.

The throng started chanting the name of the god again and again: Olokun! Olokun! Olokun! As before, he joined in with them. He felt the massed sound in his body, in his blood. The woman's wild dance sped up. Jed remembered seeing some program or another about *krumping*, a spastic, high-energy dance that was in the ghetto underground back home. Young men and women would hurl themselves into hiphop rhythms with abandon. Muscle and bone became water. It was similar to what he saw now. It was terrifying. She would hurt herself, if she didn't stop—

The vulture-priest emerged from the circle with slow, steady steps. The krumping dervish ignored him, entranced by the chanting crowd and her own hummingbird beats. The priest stood in front of her, and was spattered by her profuse sweat and droplets of spit.

He raised his hand. A sapphire ring glittered on one of his fingers. The hand swooped down like a diving bird of prey. He smacked her in the center of her forehead.

She stopped moving at once.

The crowd stopped chanting.

The sigh of the sea filled in the sonic void.

“Speak!” commanded the priest.

The sea just sighed. And the woman began to reek. A smell came off her, of salt and stagnation, fish and cunt, seaweed and chemicals. She was a statue in white and blue. She suddenly moved. It was a lurch into motion. She jerked slowly, as if she were flotsam and the sand was the sea. She shook her head vigorously, and beads of sweat flowed of her body. Her blue scarf came undone and undulated to the ground. A grove of black coral—her braided hair—fell around her shoulders. She opened her eyes:

Blue, fringed with the shawl of foam, no whites in the corners. She fixed her gaze on Jed. She advanced as slowly as a zombie. The surrounding crowd spread out away from him and her.

“You,” she said, pointing a finger at him. Her voice was deep, thick and husky.

Jed's keloid tingled. It had risen from a cut he'd gotten when he was riding his bike to work a year ago. The ugly scar grew from the sea of his black skin. It was an island of deformity. For the past few months, he'd been able to ignore it. Now, it telegraphed every uncomfortable feeling he had. It was sensitive in the way arthritic bones were. Fear was the emotion that he felt. This woman was clearly deranged, and doubtlessly held some power over the gathered crowd. He felt completely the interloper, the American black who might as well have been white. The eyeshaped portals to the sea captured his reflection. They mesmerized.

Jed broke eye contact, before he sank into them. He saw the priest at the periphery, where the white sand turned brown. He caught his eye: Help. The priest shrugged. It was beyond his power. He was in her hands now.

She repeated, "You," and her overwhelming smell hit him. She stepped right up to him, and got in his face. He felt small, even though he towered over her. She could crush him, if she wanted to. She did not. "You, you are mine," she said.

Her voice was deep and male. Deeper than Nina Simone's tones. A basso profundo that creaked and cracked like hurricane-warped wood. She stank, and Jed thought of fishscales, wavering fronds, fishshit and oil. She smelled like leviathan whales, and the strange fish that dwell at the bottom of the ocean that have bioluminescence. "Mine..."

The sun at the bottom of the sea glowed. Dark blue into sapphire water.

All over island, there were images of the patron saint. In churches, towel, t-shirt and grottoes. The fey youth pierced by arrows. Sebastian lent his name to hotels and clubs on the island. The Arrow bed and breakfast. Saint's Peak. The island's lone gay club was called The Catamite. Those languorous eyes with luscious lashes, the slender youthful body, and the tortured poise were everywhere. You couldn't avoid it. Everywhere you turned, the murdered homosexual saint appeared, like Mary does in sandwiches and cloud formations.

The possessed woman's eyes of liquid pierced him with arrows tipped with toxins. The jolt of the eel and the sting of the ray were in that gaze.

"Mine..."

Echoes in underwater grottoes.

She took his hand, and Jed rose. He followed, wanting to hear the echoes. She pulled him to the water's edge, then into the water itself. They walked out into the water, which was as warm as mother's milk, knee high, then waist high. On the shore, the gathering had reformed their half O shape. The woman—who was something more than a woman—led him on. Jed felt the silky carpet of the ocean floor. A smooth pebble or stone would graze his feet. Waves crested and they went underneath them for thrillingly brief seconds. He saw faces in algae, and fish made of sunlight. Before long, even that didn't matter. He was floating, massaged by water streams. They stopped at some point, and just bobbed like buoys.

A current of cold water broke the spell, or whatever it was. The safety of the woman's grip ended. Jed felt the cold fingers of the current run through his legs. The cold bit him. They were frozen, and he began shivering immediately.

"What the hell..."

His guide was shocked awake with him. The sea spilled out of her eyes, into the surrounding water. She closed her eyes, and abruptly snapped awake, with prosaic brown eyes and panic in them. She shrieked.

"Calm down," Jed told her, through his chattering teeth. "We'll make it back to the shore together." There would be time later to figure out what had happened. The people on the shore were not quite dots. And the cold current wasn't that strong. He felt its insistent touch, as if he were being tickled by feathers of ice. His companion, completely freaked out by now, began to babble in her patios. She battled the waves, and began to swim, clumsily, toward the shore. Jed began to follow suit, and found that he couldn't feel his limbs. A lesson on

hypothermia came back to him as he tried to control his cryogenic body. He felt he no longer had blood in his veins; it had turned to liquid nitrogen.

He watched as the woman made her slow progress to the shore, to the group of people who waited for her and loved her. He was frozen in the sea, a sacrifice to some unknown god. Jed strained his muscles, felt nothing. His body was no longer his own. Soon, his body would go into shock, and the gravity of the sea would pull him under. Surely, the people on the shore would realize what had happened to him, and would go for help? Unless, this was his punishment for witnessing their secret service. Jed felt the stirrings of rage. Death was too big of a penalty for seeing what was conducted in public. Those stupid savages... But, he remembered that they were kind, and had let him join in. He remembered clapping, and singing along with them. Of course, they would go for help, as soon as they realized what had happened to him. It would be too late to save him, though.

Almost as an afterthought, Jed called out. What started out as “help” turning in a long, anguished howl that was carried away by the wind, the sea, and various ambient noises. He tired his voice out. Still, he drifted away, carried by a riptide. Rising hillocks of sapphire and emerald separated him from the shore.

“You are mine,” said the woman with the voice of the sea, and she was right. He was now of the water. Soon, he would be one with salt, and fish. Images and emotions of his past life flashed before his eyes in random and senseless order. Candy from a favorite aunt. Watching Prague emerge from the window of a train. The first time he had sex. He was giving all his memories—all of his essence—to the water. The sea had a name. It was Olokun.

Something within him, something dark and instinctual, reacted to the bubble of thought. The name meant something. Just thinking it made him less cold. (Of course, he was going mad). But, if he were going mad, what did it hurt, to say the name aloud?

“Olokun,” he said aloud, as he sunk beneath a surge of saltwater. His lungs filled as he was submerged beneath the murk. He popped back up like a buoy, and said the name again. He felt his fingers tingle, and the balls of his feet. He could feel his body again. He did not dare to hope what the third pronunciation might bring. Would he be free of the riptide? It was foolish, magical thinking, like the believers. And yet, Jed had never really been a committed agnostic. The supernatural was a nice idea; logic was overrated, as far as he was concerned. He said “Olokun” a third and final time.

The sea froze. Everything froze. No waves. No birds. No current. No sound. Jed might have been alone in the world. He saw each molecule of water. Beneath the water he saw a jellyfish, a translucent silver balloon with pastel organs, caught in the knot of time, as if trapped in blue Lucite. A spot of golden sunlight stained the surface of the sea. He could see the striations of wrinkles. The golden spot was an island of light on the face of the sea. The whole world held its breath. The arrow was knocked. Who did the world wait for?

Motion. It happened all it once. The crest of a wave, the shiver of jellyfish, a gulp of water in his lungs. The current came back, stronger than before, and it tugged him underneath the waves. He could no longer fight it. The sea swallowed him. He was pulled down, into the deep. Bubbles of air escaped him, little silver jellyfish heading for the surface that he would never see again. Cold water rushed to fill his lungs and nostrils, to crush them. He let out a gasp, to hurry the business of drowning. No bubble of air escaped.

Jed blinked. He took another breath, and found that his lungs were satisfied. The invisible current that he was trapped within was not cold, either. It was a warm as the zephyrs that played across St. Sebastian. He blinked, and found that he could breathe, even as the curtain-like drapes of sunlight slowly receded.

I am dead, he thought. Some chemical had dumped into his brain, and filled it with peaceful hallucinations to lead him to death, that was

the only reasonable explanation. I might as well enjoy this elevator ride to Death.

He settled into the unseen cushion that bore him down in the yawning depths. The current led him through a shoal of grouper, with bright yellow fins and spotted like giraffes. They wove and danced around him, aquatic sunlight given form. Other, finer fish, in colors of green and electric blue appeared now and then, and ignored him. Jed flew past a coral bed, pink and treacherous. Once, a shark lunged at him, but something—the current?—kept it at bay.

Down and down and down he went. A light disappeared; he found he could still see perfectly, as if he had dark-adapted eyes. He saw blue in the darkest tones, possibility beyond the human spectrum. He made up names for the colors that he saw: Strata Blue. Stygian Cerulean. Chthonian Indigo. He sped by valleys and chasms where who knew what lived. Giant squid, whales and other leviathans of the deep hid in the topography.

Just as Jed relaxed in the current, he noticed that the speed of his travel slowed down. The speed lessened, the deeper he got into the water. He looked behind him, since he was “seated” backwards, to see what new sights were ahead.

At first, he thought it was a cliff, a misshapen underwater mountain. Then he saw the “mountain” had familiar shapes in it. Car parts, pipes, coral, and shells. It was a mountain of junk. Engines and abandoned fans nested among coral reefs and various skeletons of long dead sea creatures. At various intervals were circular openings to the mountain; some of these were filled with the portal windows of ships. Fish darted out of the open ones, vanishing into the hollow center of the mountain, like tourists into a cathedral... With that thought, it occurred to him that this structure was, in fact, some kind of building. It was too *arranged* for it not to be. The current nudged him further on, to the bottom of building of shells and sea wrecks. He stopped and hovered in the chthonian indigo, in front of a large door. It yawned. Its frame was formed by the ribs of some huge whale, and fringed with hundreds,

thousands of glimmering coins—the long lost treasure of pirates. Irregular circles of golden, the embossing faded and verdigrised. Jed waited. The whole ocean floor waited.

For what?

For *whom*?

The answer was obvious. It vibrated in his heart, his head, and his soul. The excitement was inseparable from the fear. It thrummed through him, like electricity. He felt himself harden with anticipation.

In the hollow of dark contained by the steeped door, Jed saw movement—filmy, diaphanous swirls of movement. Cobalt dark changed to electric blue as the form resolved itself. The first thing Jed saw was the eyes. They burned, lambent and green like cat's eyes. But there was no oval slit to interrupt the green. It became clear that these glowing almond-shapes were eyes, when whatever light under the sea described a face. The skin was like lava, turned into fabric. The high cheekbones and high forehead, the wide nose, the whole architecture of the face had this marvelous black stuff stretched across it. It looked as hard as rock, and as soft as silk. Nappy, knotted hair adhered to the top of the head—black coral. As the figure emerged from the door, Jed saw the giant man's magnificent torso. Lava skin, firm pectorals, and the large dinner plate sized nipples, plummy in color. His waist tapered downward. Jed throbbed in anticipation—both his keloid and his groin. His eyes traveled down the molten skin, where surely perfectly shaped, large genitalia were...

Below the giant's waist was a finely woven garment of blue scales that shimmered with glints of green and gold. It was skirt of peacock feathers. Jed looked for garment's end, to see legs ropy and thick with muscle. He found that the garment didn't end. It continued, covering his feet, and ended with a filmy, flowing fin. Jed laughed—he could imagine the Icelandic singer Bjork wearing such an outfit. Then it hit him, the realization, with the force of a tidal wave. The giant was not wearing a skirt. That was his tail. He was—Olokun. The one who dragged him a thousand miles beneath the sea's surface. The one who he

was sacrificed to... The betrayal of the people on the beach was withering. It overwhelmed the wonder of the merman and the palace of shells and junk. The creature (or god) must have perceived Jed's final recognition, for a slight smirk played at the corner of his (His?) lips of plum. The pupilless eyes of his captured Jed. He was a fly caught in absinthe. The eyes raked him, burned away his clothes, until he stood naked before the god. He was so weak; Olokun's presence was like Kryptonite to him. Jed had to do something soon, before he was devoured. What would it be like, to be crushed by the giant pearls of his teeth? He'd be devoured, his negritude nourishing the substance of myth. The useless bits, the gristle of Europe and the West, would be shat out, spread across the sea...

"Please," said Jed. Or he thought it. This far down, bubbles flattened and elongated. "Spare me."

The fishman, still contained by the borders of the door, shook with silent and majestic laughter. A couple of glowing fish swam on either side of his head, illuminating his face. Cowrie shells were nesting in his hair. Barnacles in psychedelic colors grasped his chin, buried in thickets of hair.

*Spare you*, he replied in the voice of gods, *why should I spare you when you have been looking for me ever since you came here?*

"What are you talking about?"

Images were placed in his mind, like precious jewels in a velvet-lined box:

The incense-soaked, shadow shrouded cathedrals and churches he visited on the island. The self-conscious prayers to the Black Madonnas, the multiracial and androgynous Christs. The visits to the grotto of Saint Sebastian, and the fountain where he leaned languorously, in an ecstasy of arrows. The half formed prayers before he entered into bars where male beauty was of paramount importance. All of his clandestine prayers the same: to remove the raised blemish on his face.

The merman God chuckled. Bubbles of power escaped from sculpted lips.

He said, *Those prayers did not work. Those gods did not listen. I listen.*

Jed's heart leapt. "You—can help me?" His keloid burned icily.

A barely perceptible nod of the massive head.

His voice-force boomed in Jed's skull: *Why you want to remove that proud flesh from your face? You are marked. You have a map of Guinea on your face. You should be happy.*

"Please," said Jed.

*You must give me something.*

What could he possibly give this being of lava and scales, of iridescence and shells? Could he give him soul—a kind of Faustian bargain? As Jed considered what the god might want, he was interrupted.

*I will take this thing,* Olokun's voice broadcast across his brain with satellite precision.

"What--? Wait..."

But a wave engulfed his thoughts. They were swallowed in a sea of obsidian and lapis lazuli water, ground down by molars of coral, turned into particles of silt. They drifted down to the belly of the man leviathan. Images hissed away, in ghost of steam. Blond-haired Adonises, with muscles of alabaster, neither regions of coral. Blue eyes burned in the liquid furnace of Olokun's belly, as did aquiline noses and thin lips. Brown haired Jesus, tonsured men of the one God and the whores and virgins went down the ethereal intestines, to become more mulch for bottom of the oceans. Jed was seared in flames of cold ice. He bounced in the phantom belly, and was rejected himself, of the anus of Olokun, along with the silt—

Yellow sands, and the bare feet of black people—his people—were the first things he saw. He heard the screech of seabirds, the sigh of waves, and the low singing of a chorus of people. He rolled over on his back, and found the crystal blue sky encircled by a ring of singing, concerned faces. He was back on the beach. He was sort of cold—he coughed, and seawater was expelled from his lungs, further soaking his already sodden clothes. Absurdly, the group of people began to laugh

and clap. Jed thought unkind thoughts as he crashed back down into sleep.

His second awakening was gentler. Someone had stripped the clothing from his body, and placed a blanket over him. A pillow was underneath his head. But he was still on the beach. He saw the sky streaked with cirrus. He was warm and relaxed. Jed stretched, and instinctively touched the side of his face, to check his keloid. He felt nothing.

He felt again, expecting the ugly, knotted network of raised skin. He felt smooth, uninterrupted flesh, soft as silk. He rubbed again. It was wondrous, tender, but it did not tingle. Jed pulled his covering away, and cautiously stood up. He was nude, but he didn't care. The serpent sun under the sea was in his heart. He was whole again.

And the island loved him.

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**Craig Laurance Gidney** lives and works in Washington, DC. He has had fiction published in *Riprap*, *Say...Have You Heard This One?*, and *Spoonfed*. His reviews of ambient-ethereal music have appeared in numerous online venues.

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