

O Rybabě a Mořské duši



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MEANDER

Rybaba and The Sea Soul



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R y b a b a   a n d   T h e   S e a   S o u l

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What flashed through my head

As I drew fish

Which flashed through my head

As I wrote about them.

On the first Tuesday that ever was in the world - although it had no idea it was Tuesday, and would be Tuesday again in seven days' time - now on this second day, God separated water from water, and slipped the Sky into the space between them. And on Wednesday, on the third day, God gathered the waters under the Sky into one place, and the dry land was revealed. The dry land was called Earth and God breathed the soul of air into it, and into the waters below He poured the salty soul of the sea. And on Friday, on the fifth day, the sea teemed with every imaginable sort of fish and wildlife. And they were fertile and well pleased with their world, and swam about or simply let themselves drift through its boundless space.

Thus, the kingdom of the sea came to be.


The bottom of the sea is a slippery place

Down there there's a bit of unease


But it's also a calm and peaceful place


You can drink this peace if you please.


Once there was a fish and her name was Rybaba. Around her there was nothing but darkness. It was dark to her right and dark to her left. Dark in front of her and dark behind her. Dark above and dark below - in short, everywhere was the same dark darkness.

Rybaba was used to it by now; she enjoyed it and could see her way through it. But she remembered that before, when she was still small and not sure which way was up, there were many times she ended up scraping the bottom, convinced she had made it to the top. As fishes go, Rybaba was clearly in the dark. 


She knew nothing, save peace and quiet and whispers and darkness. For even if a dreadful storm raged on the surface, and the waves rose up thirty feet, down here the water remained still, and only its sleeping breath gently swayed Rybaba.


Smooth and slippery, she glided through the endless sea night without the slightest sound. All the while there was little to see – or rather, little to fear. Those miniature flickering Chinese lanterns were just tiny sparkling fishes. Those fabulous, darkly looming shapes turned out to be the shadows of fish rocking and rolling, and the rippling grasses dancing their slinky snake dance. 


At the very bottom, flowing as slow as honey, were two springs – down here, they call them streams. Between the two, most fish found a way to navigate. One stream was warm; it flowed around Baleena Whale Mountain, and down into the Grand Valley as far as the Shell Rocks. The other stream was cold and wandered off in the opposite direction. The two crossed at a place called Laughing Water. Laughing Water gave so much pleasure to so many different fishes! They spent countless hours plunging delightedly from one stream to the other. O it was great fun! And it was at this very spot that Rybaba once overheard a mysterious conversation between two snakes. 

“Have you seen the light yet?” 


“What light?” 



“The light – that place where the dark is missing.” 

“Where?” 

“There, up there – you can see it if you swim to the top of Baleena Whale Mountain.” 

All at once Rybaba recalled the old rumors she had listened to when she was young. To her way of thinking, they were just fairy-tales. In other words, daylight would never dawn on a deep-sea fish. But from time immemorial rumors had been floating about. Somewhere high above, so the upper fish said, there was a definite end to the sea; a place called Dry Land, where light lives. Yet none of the fish could say exactly what light was, and if fish journeyed upward in search of the light, they were never heard from again.

  
There were murmurs: every day the sea spoke to its surface, and all those sea words and the bubbling and muffled rumbling eventually drifted downward. And the sea grasses and the floating forest seemed to strain upwards as if pointing towards some thing.

  
Rybaba had noticed all this a long time ago. But she couldn't swim to the top of Baleena Whale Mountain. Deep-sea fish aren't able to swim that high; they can only breathe in the strong pressure at the bottom of the sea. Still, she was terribly attracted by the vision of a light somewhere up above just as we, living in the light, are tempted down into the darkness of the cave's mouth. 

One time the cold current carried Rybaba as far as the floating forest. She came upon a small clearing hidden away in the middle of it, and stopped. There, in the roots of a coral throne, lived the old Medusa. All the fish said she was exceedingly wise and able to slow down the sea. And it was to Medusa that Rybaba decided to confide her secret desire. Medusa sat on her throne. She gave off a faint greenish glow which illuminated her veils. She was reading a bulky yellowed book, bound with the leaves of the Giant Flagbearer. Next to her was a sea sponge saturated with black ink. From time to time she pricked it with a sea needle, drew some ink, and with a flourish, made a notation in the book. ◡

“Good stream,” Rybaba said in greeting as she entered the Medusa’s green glow. ◡

Medusa raised her tired eyes from the book. “Good stream,” she answered in surprise. She was already quite old and it had been ages since anyone had visited her. ◡

“I am Rybaba and I have... I want... well, the truth is, I have heard that you know so much.” ◡

“First of all,” Medusa said kindly, “perhaps I should know what I ought to know so that I can help you.” ◡

Rybaba was silent, not knowing how to begin. And so Medusa began. ◡



“To tell you the truth, I am glad you came. Nobody’s visited me in a long time. Octopus was my last visitor. She brought me this fine black ink. Did she make me laugh! She wanted to show me where Shark took a bite out of her tentacle. But she has so many of them! I couldn’t figure out which she meant!”

“You have such a lovely glow,” Rybaba blurted out.

“That’s the very thing I need,” Medusa sighed. “It’s not what it used to be.”

“It is very dark around here,” Rybaba said, catching her drift.

“Oh yes, the dark.” Medusa looked about the clearing.

“I have heard...”

“But it is a beautiful dark,” Medusa continued. “Although Octopus alone gave me proof of the blackest dark. She left me a little of her ink in my sponge for writing. Have you ever written with ink?”

“I don’t know how to write,” Rybaba said, confused and disappointed at the turn in conversation.

Medusa prompted her, “But you wanted to tell me something?”

“Yes!... I mean... I heard that up there,” sputtered Rybaba, “...above us... it is said... there is light.”

Medusa fell silent. Her eyes blinked weakly as she recalled her journey upward. How blissfully she had inhaled the light on the surface of the sea. How long she had hidden that light within her veils – even down here at the bottom – and used her body like a magnifying glass to project the light out to all the deep-sea fishes.

That was so long ago. Now she resembled a flickering light bulb, and her veils were overgrown with the roots of her coral throne.

“Yes, you are right. There is a light above us but it is very far from here.”

“In a place called Dry Land,” Rybaba said excitedly.

“Yes, made solely of air –”

“Soul of Air?”

“Not S-O-U-L like the sea has,” Medusa explained. “S-O-L-E-L-Y – only – air.”

“Air?”

“It is something that is not wet.”

“What is it then?” Rybaba asked eagerly.

Medusa eyed Rybaba, “I’m not sure I can enlighten you, you’re a bit dull.” She went on in a firm voice, “If it is something that is Not Wet, it is Dry.

Up above is a big yellow light that dries everything out.”  
Rybaba brightened. “And you need just such a light for your cap,”  
she declared.

Medusa nodded. “Yes, but the light is strong. Anyone looking  
directly into its dazzling lamp goes blind.”

“Still, I would like to see it... very much!”

Silence again filled the clearing. Medusa turned a page in her  
book. Finally she said, “Dear Rybaba, you have to understand,  
that is not so easy.”

“And why is not so easy?”

Medusa spoke slowly, as if thinking out loud: “First you must  
swallow the soul of the Dry Land. You will be taken up into its  
world. You will cease to be a fish. You can never return - unless  
you swallow the Sea soul again. To swallow the Dry Land’s soul  
you must take in three deep breaths - but only three! And timing  
is everything. The light comes and goes, it alternates with the dark.  
You have to reach the surface while the Dry Land’s soul is shining.  
This is all very treacherous. As far as I know, no fish that swallowed  
the Dry Land’s soul has ever returned to the sea.”

“Dear Medusa, please tell me the secret way to Dry Land,”

Rybaba pleaded, “and I will bring you back the yellow light for  
your cap.”

“O.K.” A smile flickered across Medusa’s face. “Listen carefully  
to what I say. I do know of a place where you can find some of  
the Dry Land’s soul. In Lower Channel, behind Baleena Whale  
Mountain, there are some large vessels with long ears and pointed  
bottoms buried in the sand. Inside their mouths you will find a bit  
of the Dry Land’s soul. Breathe it in deeply. But don’t forget! Only  
three times! And the same goes for your return trip - you can only  
swallow three sips of the Sea soul!”

Rybaba thanked the wise Medusa and rushed off towards Baleena  
Whale Mountain. From there it was not far to Lower Channel.

She began to search for the large vessels with long ears.

It was pretty hard to find them with all that dark around her. After  
groping and scraping about in the sand a good while, she came  
upon a long ear and felt for its pointed bottom. At first she dared  
not enter its mouth, but curiosity soon overcame her fear. She  
found herself in the throat of a clay amphora.

It seemed as dark in there as it had been outside. As she went  
further in, though, she began to feel as if she had plunged into  
a peculiarly empty pool. This must be air, she thought. She didn’t  
forget Medusa’s advice. She breathed deeply three times, and  
on the last breath, something very light and tickling flooded her  
soul.