

hoh, sea slugs!
are you creatures of dusk
or early dawn?

Rosen, 17th Century

Make ready for the water dance:
nylon-spandex blend stretched taut
over ribs, all extending limbs, then
seal up each well-conditioned chignon
in a mucous mould, soft seemly pro-V perfection.
Insoluble petroleum jelly! Layers like resin, a knucklebone-thick,
let go no singularly joyful strand
between surface dives, kaleidoscopic beats;
pointed pedicures kicked through a chlorine calm.
The back bends now, now breathe deep.

*A dramatic end to the repertoire there. Stopped dead in the water like corpses.
Disquieting.¹*

Their saltwater cnidaria sisters
assemble sweet elegance with far less art;
fewer corners, straighter desires,
manual two-way processing
(feed and shit via selfsame lips),
melting over again and again.
Polyp to medusa to polyp to
medusa to polyp to
medusa, &c. Which number to-the-
trillionth-power generation are today
descendant from, those complexities first wrought
in the Cambrian period?

All of the time in the world is under the ocean.
So for rhythm – *Exxon Valdez, Deepwater
Horizon* – unfortunate caesurae in
the ecological metre, comprised by
differentiation and other mis-
transcriptions of mRNA; wound up
cloudily now into several, gelatinous,
phantasmaglobular shapes.
Brined in black they ascend, a listless end:
surface death. (Precursor zooplankton
fossilized into crude oil, refined petrol –
what material irony a tanker spills!)

Radial symmetry sees no left, no moral right
Up is light, depths dreaming, sentience
in the stream of side-to-side.
SPINELESS cuts like steel on dry land,

but paraphyletic invertebrates share more
dissimilarity; the sea a solvent for the gravity of men.
Here the Gorgon's head bobs free, Venus's girdle
find loose on the tide, suspended among the
Nereid annelids – in an equalizing soup.
So bare a life scorned by existentialisms,

*The viscous . . . does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible. Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it.*²

Environmental organism of the mediatic!
For this bewildering jelly, peeled open like
silk pleating, embraces the external with all anatomy.
Between myself and it: no edge
All pleasure; ether condensed to
milky mercurial matter. As if the object of
Pygmalion's desire, had been Poseidon –
and in the heat of passion,
the sculptor's block quickened to a molten aluminium;
twisting into longspear, then slenderer tendrils,
limp lamé noodles in the hand, hanging
too kindly for their toxic sting.

Aloof on millennial swells: long-stranded,
curlicued, luminescent, blue. Grand elastic
expression of a will to *formless*.
To the port side, unceremoniously, see
the men o'war swarming pale anklebones, periscoping.
A Bugsby Berkeley Slasher in open-water rehearsal:
synchronised swimmers *stopped dead in the water*
Nature's *telos* straight to DVD
Toss out the life-preserver!
buried, there under the wet kelp, dying squid.

*There's a shocking amount of genetic similarity between jellyfish and human beings, said Kevin J. Peterson, a molecular paleobiologist.*³

Kari Rittenbach

¹ Mark Langshaw, 'Olympic Synchronised Swimming, Day Ten', *Sports Mole*, 6 August 2012, http://www.sportsmole.co.uk/swimming/team-gb/olympics/live-commentary/live-commentary-olympic-synchronised-swimming-day-10-as-it-happened_38722.html.

² J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, H. E. Barnes, trans., New York, 1956.

³ Nathaniel Rich, 'Can a Jellyfish Unlock the Secret of Immortality?' *The New York Times*, 2 Dec 2012, MM32. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/02/magazine/can-a-jellyfish-unlock-the-secret-of-immortality.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0