

## What Scares Me to Death

The sea has played only a very minor role in my life. I have always avoided the beach, disliking swimming, surfing, sun, salt and sand, finding the noise of the waves stressful, the screaming of the seagulls grating, the endless turquoise of the ocean uninspiring, the salt spray carried on the breeze harsh and unpleasant. Not for me the sensuous delight of hot sun on bare skin; the pleasure-pain shock of cold water on overheated body; the freedom of being lifted and carried by the surging waves. The delights of the water cannot tempt me, nor the thrills of the surf entrap me.

Some of my antipathy to the sea stems from childhood. My earliest memories of the beach are ambivalent. I remember fondly the fun and laughter of family picnics at the seaside. I also recall vividly the terror of being overwhelmed by a towering wave, of being tossed and turned angrily beneath the water, only to emerge coughing and spluttering, my eyes streaming, my mouth and nose filled with salt water, my hair thick with sand.

In short, I am afraid of the sea, of its uncontrollability, its irresistible force. Again and again I have found myself powerless in the path of the unstoppable, threatening surge of a looming, foam-tipped wave, waiting for the unceremonious dumping and the misery which follows. I remember the terrifying sense of inevitability I had felt in the face of a moving mountain of water, knowing, like Judith Wright, "It is no matter whether I submit or rebel; the event will still happen" (*Ishtar*, 1953).

On a recent trip to the beach with my family I followed my usual pattern, sitting on a grassy knoll under a shady tree to read, my back to the glare of the sun on the water. I am an expert at blocking the sound of the breaking waves from my consciousness, at ignoring the tangy smell of the salt air in my nostrils, as I immerse myself in the cerebral delights of a favourite book. I can sit thus for hours, engrossed in a world of words far removed from my physical surroundings.

However, on this day I was distracted. As I sat, seeking my usual escape into thoughts stimulated by the pages balanced on my knees, I was finding it increasingly difficult to disregard the sound and the smell of the water far below me. The pounding of the waves seemed to reverberate in my body, setting up an echoing pulse in my tissues. The salt tang seemed strangely familiar, less an unwelcome olfactory stimulus than a subtle sensory reminder of my own moist, salty essence. I felt less alien in this seaside environment than was usual for me.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, I turned to face the water. I was strangely tempted to venture closer. The water seemed to beckon me, urging me to draw nearer, promising ... promising ... something. Almost without conscious volition I removed my shoes and put the book in my backpack. I walked thoughtfully down the sand dunes and across the damp sand until I stood in a tiny cove protected by a rocky outcrop. With each incoming wave the water raced up the sand, spilling onto the black rocks, before suddenly changing its mind and retreating, tumbling over itself in its haste to escape.

The waves splashed playfully up my legs, wetting my jeans. I felt the coolness on my sun-warmed feet and ankles. The ebbing water sucked at the wet sand, so that my feet sank into the depressions thus created. Such a gentle caress; such a simple pleasure, hitherto unknown. For the first time in my life I looked at the sea with joy. For the first time ever I saw, really saw, the delicate blue-green hue of the water as it ebbed and flowed on the golden sand.

I laughed aloud as the salt spray wet my face. I felt a peace that I had long yearned for, a peace that knew nothing of submission, and everything of simplicity, that asked no surrender, and offered only truth. It was a sacred moment, an intimate experience.