

Crouched on the rocks, he tipped onto his toes over the little water-filled crevice and stuck out his hand. "Cherry," he whispered, "the bucket!"

"Here. What is it?"

"Shh. That orange rock. Look." He lifted it up and touched its underside with a stick.

She shivered. It was alive. It rippled. Writhed maybe. "Hey," she said, "don't hurt it."

Twisting his mouth at her, he plopped the orange thing into the pail. He ladled water over it with one hand.

"Remember what pool you got him out of," she leaned over for a better look, "so he won't be disoriented when we put him back."

"C'mon," he snorted. "They spend every day and every night in a different puddle. Wherever the ocean deposits them."

"Really?" She poked the crusty shell tentatively. "No family ties?"

"No family ties." He was feeling the crater where the creature had been.

"How conscious are they?"

"Conscious of pain probably. Hunger. Let's see what we can find for the old boy to eat."

She gagged aloud. "Maybe it's an old girl," she said. "Maybe she'd like crumpets and a laxative." She stood up and checked out Shasta who, her whitish fur browned with water, was sniffing at some kelp behind them. "All this supposition," Cherry said, "that lower forms have no feelings the way we do. Maybe they aren't even lower forms. Why do we assume they don't feel?" Her tennis shoes squished behind his on the wet rocks. "Just because we can't look them in the eye?"

He crouched at another indentation and dangled a hermit crab in front of her face. "Here. Let's see if Jumbo Jim wants lunch."

"Maybe," she said, "Jumbo Jim's a vegetarian."

"Not a chance."

"Just because we don't know how different creatures think." She leaned over his shoulders as he turned the orange shell and dropped the tiny crab onto the cold soft stomach flesh of the rock creature.

The rock creature was not a vegetarian.

She stood up. "Now dogs," she said to the grey ocean receding in front of her, "dogs have eyes we can look into. We know dogs have feelings. They care for their pups. Their owners. They're family-oriented." She noted that Shasta was not following them. "Familiar. We can communicate with dogs."

Keith bent his thin legs and crouch-walked, motioning her towards the next tidal pool. "And how do you like being Shasta's god?"

"I'm not Shasta's god."

"Shasta's mere and pere may be responsible for her birth. But you," he turned and pointed a wet finger at her chest, "are responsible for her continued existence."

Cherry chewed on the inside of her cheek.

"You feed Shasta," he said, "and get her shots and let her sleep on your bed even when she smells bad. I," he said lightly, "need a god like you." He started to search out the water at his feet, but brought his chin up. "See that one?" He pointed. "That pool's yours. You can be its Juno or Hera or whoever. See what you have there."

She squatted, her wet tennis shoes overseeing the indentation. Tiny limpet shells lined the sides. "Limpets don't go anywhere," she said. "They probably have family and community like us. Of course they don't seem to have much contact with each other. Probably some kind of telephone or radar."

"See if you can find the PTA president." She heard his hand dive for something behind her. She looked back. "Missed. Big crab."

"What would you have done with him if you'd caught him? He wouldn't have stayed in the bucket."

"It would have been an interesting encounter though."

She sniffed. "You cerebral sorts are so humane."

"Hey now. What's the purpose of life anyway, according to your religious tenets?"

"To learn things," she responded automatically, "to grow." She dabbled her hand in the icy water. "What do you mean, my religious tenets? Don't you believe that?"

"Yeah." He looked up. He'd pushed back the sleeves of his CSH sweatshirt, but the cuffs were still dark and

# Low Tide

Karen Rosenbaum



wet. "That much I believe."

She fingered the cold hard limpets. "No more?"

"I don't know." He let out an abrupt breath and set to prying a mussel off the side of a stone.

Her fingers were losing sensation. She lifted them out of the water and shook them, spraying the rocks around.

"You'll never surprise anything that way," he said. "Be sneaky."

"I'm going to be a benevolent god," she said, "not a skulking, scientific one. My world's fine." She crawled next to him, pressed her cheek next to his leg. He was feeding the mussel to a large anemone. "Oh Keith. Why don't you serve up the whole thing now to Jumbo?" She was instantly sorry she'd said it. His eyes opened wide.

"For a benevolent god," he said, "you have some interesting ideas."

She waded off by herself over a smoother stretch of shore towards the cliffs that walled off this part of the beach. Seagulls stalked the water. She searched for a sand dollar but whenever she bent to pick one up, she found the part stuffed into the sand jagged and broken. The one round shell was marred by a gaping hole in the center where a hungry gull had pecked out its dinner and destroyed the pretty design. She slipped it into her pocket anyway. It would probably crack there. Shells were so brittle. She held up to the sky two broken angel wings.

"Shasta!" she called but Shasta apparently didn't think her voice sounded urgent enough. I am, she thought, too lenient a mistress. She took a big step to avoid walking on a quivering layer of violet—part of a jellyfish probably. Or maybe all of it. If Shasta came now, she'd nose it, destroy it maybe. Or did jellyfish secrete stuff to hurt their enemies? She stooped, scooped wet sand over it, walked on.

Her feet were rather numb, didn't even feel uncomfortable since they didn't feel at all. Her toe was wearing through the top of one of her treadless tennis shoes and she had to be careful now that she'd reached the slick rocks. These were the old-fashioned tennis shoes, the kind that weren't a status symbol, not a symbol of anything. She remembered buying them, hung by their

shoelaces on a pole marked 8, in Woolworth's.

Stream of consciousness stop one. The first Friday afternoon with Keith. Bowling at that place up on College. He'd asked for size 7 shoes, and, embarrassed to ask for size 8, she'd asked for size 7 too. She joked uncomfortably about her feet being as large as his and bowled even more uncomfortably, her cramped toes curled under. That was eight months ago, she counted on her fingers, June to April, right after she'd stopped worrying about spring exams. Right before she'd stopped worrying about big feet.

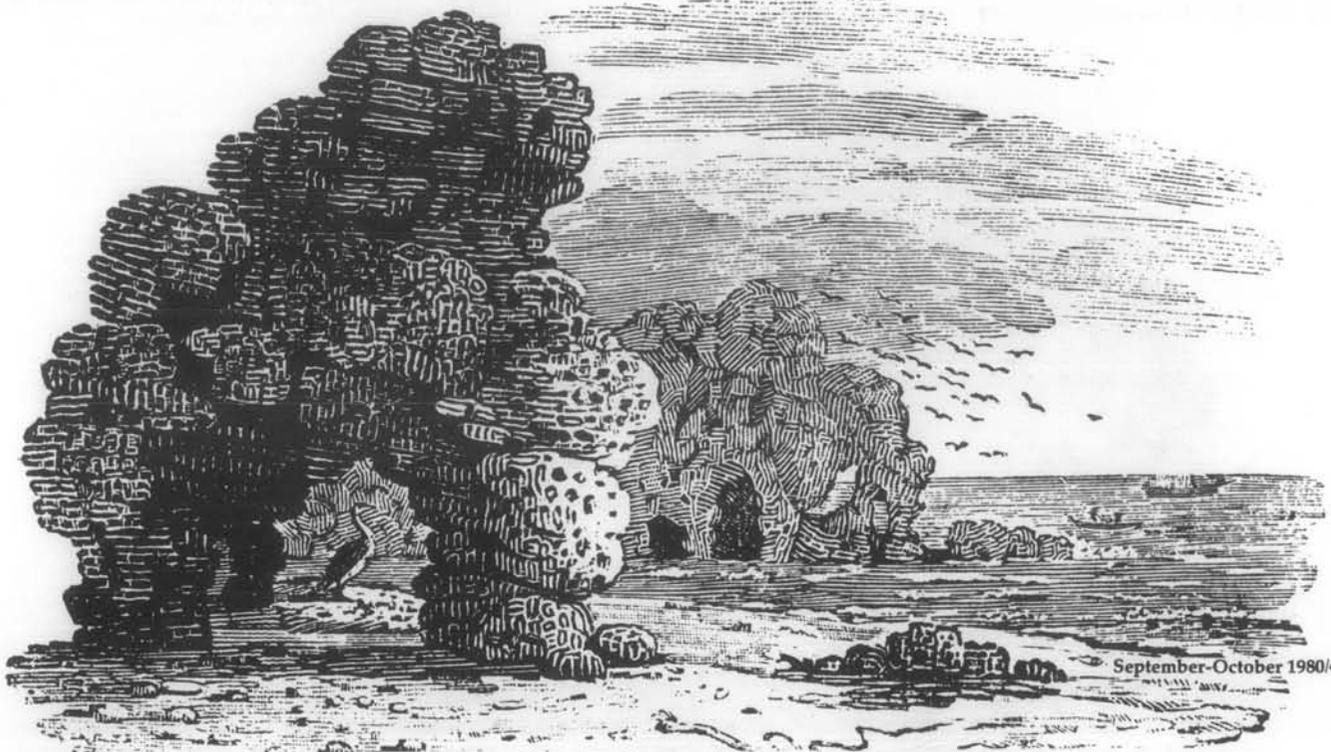
Shasta didn't come again when she whistled but Cherry didn't feel like exercising her authority. Her levis were starting to unroll so she made new cuffs around her knees. She straightened and bent her spine the other way, threw her head and neck back. The sky was fog still. If there's a heaven, it's inside you, Keith had said last week. It's not up there. Jupiter's up there. And Io. She couldn't even see the sun though today. But she could still see Keith and his bucket.

Funny. All their lives human beings spent in conflicting modes. To be alone and stand straight and tall and shout I am. And to reach out and lean against someone and hold someone up and to whisper Are we?

She waded out to where the tide still was foaming against the rocks and sat on a tall stone. The water washed over her feet every few seconds. How long were the intervals? Keith might time them. Her watch was in the glove compartment though and it didn't have a second hand anyway. She looked over at Keith whose head was up, fixed towards her. She raised her arm high, waved. He waved back.

God, she whispered. The world was so complicated. She pulled out her emptied sand dollar. Even this, simple and round, had so many parts. And the rocks and the fogs and the rings of Saturn. Human beings, parts and passions. So many parts to their passions. And even the existence of all the questions. Could it all just have happened? Big Bang. Little Bang. Lord I believe said a Biblical voice out of her brain. Help thou my unbelief.

Shasta trotted up as though she were promptly obeying that last, five-minute-old whistle, a smooth piece of



wood between her teeth. Cherry took it, patted Shasta's damp head, tossed the stick down the tide line. Turning so fast her fur sprayed, Shasta galloped down the beach. Shasta, now Shasta, was a true believer. Well. Belief depended on the object of belief being unseen. Shasta had an advantage.

Behind Shasta, a smooth stick between his teeth too, loped Keith. Cherry laughed, took both sticks, threw Shasta's back down the tide line, and dropped Keith's into his now empty bucket. "You put Jumbo back?"

"I fed him to an octopus." He sat on a neighboring rock, lower than hers. "No. I put him in the hole where I last saw the big crab."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"Okay," he said, pushing his heels into the wet sand. "Communicating with the Great Beyond?"

"Yeah."

"Make connections?"

"No."

Shasta, holding the stick between grinning teeth, jostled her. Keith took the stick this time, threw it even further, and deeper.

"Not so far in."

"She can swim."

"What if she's sucked under by a current?"

"Nah." Back on his rock, he tipped the bucket upside down and put his feet on it. He'd taped one of his shoes with wide grey metallic stuff. It wasn't holding very well.

"What if Shasta were a child?" she said.

"We'd have fed her to Jumbo Jim."

"You just don't want to talk about children."

"I don't mind talking about two children. But I don't want to talk about ten."

"I don't want ten."

He played with the metallic tape. "You want five. That's as bad."

"It's not just a religious thing. I like being one of five children."

"If there were only two kids in your family," he said, "you'd like being one of two."

"No I wouldn't."

"Cherry." He got up as Shasta trotted back. "This is not one of the things I can give in on. I can handle an occasional church meeting. I don't intend to smoke tobacco

or dope. I drink milk with every meal. My idea of a binge is club soda in a non-returnable bottle." Shasta dropped the stick at his feet and rubbed her wet body against his bare legs. "I'm into the idea of marital fidelity and family home evenings. I can handle the whole thing on sex. Right?"

She looked at her levi cuffs. "Right."

"And the kids can go to Primary and Sunday School and be baptized and be in temple pageants and be Eagle Scouts—all two of them."

"It's not just that," she whispered. Shasta looked worriedly from Keith to her. "It's that it's hard for me to keep believing when you've stopped."

He crouched beside her, his hands on her sandy legs. "I'd believe for you, sunshine," he said, "if I could." He stood up. "Look. Maybe I'm wrong." He shrugged. "Probably we're all wrong. Probably we'll never know." He tried to smile but his mouth was wrinkled. "C'mon Shasta," he said, throwing the stick in front of him. "I'll race you to the treasure." His sneakers slapped the wet sand. Dazed for half a second with joy, Shasta reared, then bounded off beside him. Shasta's faith was whole.

Cherry pulled the bucket over to her rock, upturned it. Sand streaked the sides and rimmed the bottom but all the little live things were gone. A grain of sand. A pismire is perfect and a grain of sand. It sounded like a psalm. And a mouse, Whitman had said, and if a mouse then why not a hermit crab. Why not a hermit crab is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels?

They weren't infidels though. Exfidels she thought. And she did feel staggered. Shasta had beaten Keith to the stick and relinquished it and he was once more throwing it further down the beach. They both took off again.

Swinging the bucket, she waded back over to the smoother sand. The water washed out over her feet. She fell onto her knees and dug furiously. Sometimes if you fell on your knees and dug furiously you caught a little sand crab. She brought up a handful of heavy drenched sand, the sea leaking out her fingers down her arm. She opened her fist and the sand slid out too. No crab. Or if there had been one, it got away.

KAREN ROSENBAUM received an MA in English from Stanford. She teaches at Ohlone Jr. College in Fremont, California.

