

Other Islands

Stacey Gruver

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Love and gratitude to Izy Gruye and my family, without whom this book wouldn't be possible.

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Wild Caught

Dana doesn't remember how she got here, what she was before her husband found her. He hauled her from the depths, and she woke in his house.

Now, she's a starving blood fluke squirming down the house's dry veins. She thrashes against walls too thick to eat through. She slides over open thresholds that lead her back to the desiccated heart of the beast.

She can't find a way out.

She learns to breathe air, to eat dust.

Beach Rescue

A younger version of herself found herself beached on the shores of this dry world. Her husband found her. He brought shade, brought bottles of water, brought nets.

What other choice did she have? Stay where she was, stranded and suffocating, skin blistering in the sun.

He isn't the sea, but in his house she has shade. She has water. Enough to survive.

Proper Care and Feeding

his husbandry leaves much to be desired

she's always itchy, always sluggish

the water too stagnant

the light too bright

she adapts

she spends days circling, waiting for feeding time

the feed is inadequate, tasteless

dissolves like tissue on her swollen tongue

she adapts again and again

the stress frays her

her hair thins, her nails band and split

the corners of her mouth redden and crack

rough patches bloom on her cheeks, multiply across her body

like lights reflecting on the surface of a cold sea

she's a castaway on the swells of her body

she can feel salt crusting her joints

stiffening her limbs

blistering her skin

she adapts

she drinks more water

she stops looking in mirrors

she starts looking through windows

Hygge

She tries to make her husband's house her home, but the house resists. Every throw pillow she places, every curtain or cheerful print she hangs is rejected. She feels it in the way the light muddies colors, sharpens edges, warps shapes out of proportion.

The house doesn't like her--its antipathy lapping at her in never ending waves of dust. It hangs in the dim, dry air. Quivers in the webs that are spun and respun in every corner. Lurks behind the furniture that squats like rock formations in every room. Unmoved and unmovable.

Hunger

Hunger is an unwanted stranger. It bangs on her door, flicks the lights, drops silverware down the stairs. She thumps and rattles. She uncurls her fingers and watches them skid along the rim of her bowl. Steaming porridge speckled with brown sugar and laced with milk. It sits inside her like ballast. She can't float away.

Food makes her harder to capsize, so she tolerates the space it takes from her. She hates how hard this is. Keeping this vessel fueled. This machine fed.

Splinter

A glass splinter glistens in her fingertip. She watches the skin redden and swell around it, hoarding it jealously.

She traces the bump of inflammation, the hard edge of the glass with the tip of her tongue. She tries to squeeze the splinter free, but her flesh won't release it. It burrows deeper. The pain is mild but a constant companion. A burr snagging her attention--here I am, here I am, here I am.

It's trapped. She wants to free it. Her skin burns around it. Her unpricked fingers tingle in sympathy.

With a thumbnail, she pushes until a slick of blood washes it out. The blood is pale, mixed with clear fluid--warm and salty.

She Draws A Bath

Downstairs her husband is pacing, talking on the phone with a stranger. His voice is loud, sharp and rough as a rasp against her stiffening shoulders, her tightening jaw.

She draws a bath for herself. She sinks into the water's quiet mouth, likes the way its tongue fills her ears. The water's teeth shreds sound waves. Only flakes reach her. The flakes are nothing. They don't rock her or push her off course. The current is stronger than his noise, always.

Skin Care Routine

She exfoliates until her belly fills with microbeads. She lists in the steamy air and cool light of the bathroom, her fingers pressing against the sink's damp porcelain lip. The rough edge of an unseen crack catches her thumb. She worries it like a chipped tooth as she stares into the foggy mirror.

Her reflection thankfully drowned, swallowed like the horizon where the sky bleeds into sea and sea smokes into sky. All is silver vapor. All is just water anyway--this air sliming her face and the back of her throat. Better to abandon the surface. Better to take one deep breath and dive.

Bad Weather

She licks her dusty fingers clean enough to handle the good linens, but this week the house is set against her. Above every room a ceiling heavy and lowering, promising rain and hail. Her every movement provokes storm clouds. Sends a downpour of fuzzy light to batter the heirloom sitting chair, the antique end table.

The charged air irritates her eyes, closes her throat. She sits still, lets the weather settle. The wind stops, but the rain doesn't. Her shoulders are grey-scaled, her hair grit-roughened. She closes her eyes, breathes through her mouth. She sits as still as she can. For as long as she can.

Lying Ahull

She dreams the house shudders and stretches, heaves its body into open water. The house drifts, and she drifts with it.

Outside her bedroom window the sky is a piercing blue pinned over a gently rolling sea. She goes from window to window. Watches the water sparkle with sunless light. Watches the horizon shiver and darken. A storm, she thinks. But it's far away, and she can't tell if she's heading towards it or away.

Jellyfish

1.

When the windows are open, she can't stop shivering.
When they're closed, the air eats itself. Swallows its own oxygen.

She wonders what it would be like to have no air at all,
to gasp and gasp and come up empty, to struggle and still die.

Easy to kill with absence, with neglect, with inaction.
Easy to cause suffering with want.

She wants for nothing.
Her husband makes sure her every need is met, but her body is
reluctant to open, its language opaque.

But she knows the body's need to pace from one room to another.
On the hot, lightless days, she drifts down hallways, down stairs,
her body light and aimless as a school of dust motes propelled by an unseen draft.

I'm a jellyfish, she thinks.

She likes this thought. She's watched many videos and documentaries about the sea, about jellyfish.
She knows about currents, about seas full of things that can't swim.

She thinks about stillness absolute and total, about being at the mercy of currents that could sweep her
to waters too cold or too hot or too barren for survival.

In placid waters, she would die.

2.

At night she lies next to him, listening to him breathe, and lets her hand hang over the
side of the bed. She keeps her fingers still, trailing like jellyfish tentacles through the darkness.

Her skin prickles in anticipation, alert to every stray stirring of air.

She imagines herself long and gelatinous, a shredded curtain ready to tangle and feed on whatever the
currents bring her. But her fingers twitch, a muscle spasm gives away the game. She doesn't catch
anything, but she closes her eyes and drifts off anyway.

3.

She sleeps. She dreams of seagulls out of frame and unseen. Their voices over compressed, full of data
loss and distance.

4.

The next day she dusts half-heartedly, lets her thoughts return to the jellyfish. Even the most helpless of them are not helpless, unable to move on their own but with limbs covered in harpoons and poison. They tangle, they kill, they feed.

She'll watch that documentary again when she's done with the cobwebs in the corner of this room.

5.

She's boneless, jointless, heartless, nerveless, brainless--

nothing but nematocysts, dangling arms, and a gut full of digestive enzymes.

But she wants to make her own currents, to propel things away from her or to draw things towards-- she'd like to have that choice.

Giant Tube Worms

She needs to be a deep thing, wants to be many deep things, wants to be a cluster of worms growing in water hotter than molten lead.

She lets herself unfocus, and her flesh blurs until she's one of them. Her body shelled, long, reed-like. Her head a fat lily bud that will never open.

But then she sharpens, is herself again.

The air she moves through is too thin, too light on her skin. Her joints and blood vessels swell, her organs distend. She needs pressure, lightless and binding.

Outside, wine-dark shadows fill the tiny, unkempt garden, but the pool of darkness isn't nearly deep enough. She wades in anyway. The tall grass and spindly wildflowers brush her knees, there's still too much air, too much empty space for her softened body to expand into.

Fissures And Trenches

She keeps a list of all the cracks, gaps, holes in the house. The newest ones are:

1: a short gap between the baseboard and floor in the kitchen. The floorboards have settled, or the baseboard has warped, or both of them have shrunk from each other. It's a narrow gap, a thick line of darkness skirting the edges of her vision when she flicks on the light in the mornings. Her gaze falls to it, and she wonders how deep it goes. How many crumbs, dust mites, shards of broken ceramic have made their escape.

2: a gap between the floorboards near the foot of the bed. This one's wide enough to swallow the small, narrow things she drops--coins, paperclips, wedding rings. This one groans under her weight when she crouches to pry bits of metal from its hungry, patient mouth. Sometimes she lets it keep what it takes. A few safety pins, a penny--no one will miss them.

3: a crack in the foundation. At the foot of the basement stairs there's a long sliver of disruption not even wide enough for her fingernail. The only things that could slip through are air and water, and so far she's felt no drafts. When it rains, it stays dry. She doesn't know how deep it goes, if it even reaches the other side of the wall.

Osedax

She repeats a phrase she heard on TV: "This house has good bones." She says it to herself over and over, trying to wear it down, smoothing away the parts that prick and jab at her. It's unsettling, this idea of a house having bones and her moving through them like a parasite wiggling through the body of a huge beast. This makes her a bone eater, a worm boring snug tunnels through walls of rigid tissue. The goodness of these bones is unknowable. They yield, support the hollows she carves with only the occasional groan. Is that goodness? A willingness to be honeycombed, a talent for silence. Maybe better bones would resist this. Maybe the best bones would splinter, would cave, would have buried her long before she got this far in.

Benthic Zone

her husband is gone for the evening

she's alone. it's getting dark. it's raining
the bed sheets sag with damp and the hiss of tires from distant traffic reach her in lazy waves

it's the ocean again, thin and full of static
saltwater fills the room

her skin thins, expands, dissolves--
she needs room for what's floating in her, she makes room--
blue light spills in a stream of bioluminescence from the phone on her chest but she ignores its pulsing

sound muffles, slows in her
her mass distorts it
her mass crushes things that don't belong inside her

tonight she wants the soft, hungry things swimming through her currents to be uncrushed
she's filled with fangs and nematocysts and
a depth charge: another pulse, another swirl of light
she can't answer--

a dead leviathan is sinking through her slowly enough for
its bones to be colonized, bored into, dissolved
its flesh flaking away and trailing above it, below it like a veil of snow
this body will feed many, many mouths
this body needs a witness, needs gratitude
for the gifts it gives to her depths

Swimming

She's pressed to the carpet. Back flat against the sea floor, but it's an unsteady foundation. It shakes and shudders. She shakes and shudders with it. The water she's buried under trembles and rolls, and she worries for the coasts far above her and days away. She'd follow the surge if she could. She'd chase this wave and take its momentum for herself. She could swim with currents and against them. Up into sunlit water and back into the depths as it pleased her.

Beached

Inside her: restlessness. Churning like waves slapping at a shoreline.

She moves through a haze of sweat, and there's a perpetual wetness between her legs, a gnawing ache.

It exhausts her. Any relief is temporary. A hand soothes--her own, her husband's--and tension bleeds from her only to return in the next tidal swell. She can't sit still, can't concentrate, can't sleep. Her body is awake, angry at her. Hungry and thrashing in a strangling net.

For distraction, she watches whale videos online-- watches sleek, toothed whales ride waves to snatch seals from beaches, watches behemoths heave themselves into low tides that strand them on killing shores. She watches a woman surf collapsing crests of bottle green waves, wetsuit hiding her skin and her hair soaked, plastered to the back of her neck. The woman is buried in spray and emerges grinning, and it makes Dana want to sob, to claw at something. There's nothing to claw at but herself, so she does. The woman rides one roaring swell after another while Dana rocks against her hands, throat closing, heart racing, a ruthless riptide of pleasure pulling her along but she's furious, limbs shaking as if she could rattle out of her chair, as if she could thrash her way out of this room, out of this house and into that sea, into the roar and the hissing foam that will take her. She'll be one more dark body among many--submerged, silhouetted in the glassy walls of a wave, this wave, any wave strong enough to carry her to shore.

Deep Diver (I)

She finds a gym with a pool. She swims as often as she can. Even this water deadened and roughened by chemicals is a comfort. She dives, and it holds her. It's too harsh, too thin. Later, she'll have to soak away its residue. She can add salts and oils to her bath, can imitate the sea's living, mineral heft.

She swims deeper. Her feet twitch, and her fingers trail rough concrete. She wants to kick farther down, but she's already as deep as she can go. Her breasts and belly skim the bottom of the pool--only 12 feet at it's deepest point, and she already has to surface. Blockaded and blood hungry for oxygen--she can't breathe this water, so she rises. She breaches and gulps damp, warm air. Dives again.

Drifting

1.

She moves through the streets in the warm afternoon light, her husband by her side: her body a cloud of plankton--fish eggs and invertebrate larvae and tiny shrimp--perfectly transparent, her edges blurring into the mass of air that surrounds her.

Few look at her. Light refracts through her, reaches the eyes of strangers slightly bent, slightly delayed. She's gone before a second glance can find her.

Dana doesn't mind the press of bodies, but her husband does. Her husband clings to her, his palm sweaty against hers. There's too much heat where they touch. Their skin feels like wax melting, fusing together, but she's a life raft. It would be cruel to pull away.

2.

On another day, alone, her body is a cloud of marine snow drifting through the early evening until she finds a bed of soft muck to settle on. Her particles clump, stick to each other, form larger and larger clumps until at last she's safe from filter feeders.

The ground under her feet rumbles with the weight of a passing train. It blurs by above her in a streak of dirty white. The bench she's sitting on is hard plastic slick with residual rain, cold and slippery against the backs of her thighs. She straightens her skirt, smoothing the fabric over her knees. Her coffee is still warm, its heat seeping into her palms as she takes small, careful sips. She allows small, careful warmth to settle within her, allows the damp gray air to settle over her. Another train squeals overhead, its vibrations squirming through the soles of her shoes. Her toes tingle. She shivers.

The small plaza is nearly empty. It's just her and a few wary crows eyeing her expectantly. Her pockets are empty, and that emptiness is an insult. She is the intruder here, an uninvited guest in their space.

On her next walk, she'll bring something to crumble, something to scatter.

Other Islands

Conversations with her husband take place underwater. Sound waves take their time traveling between them, arrive distorted and reluctant to be deciphered.

The sea takes her words, is uninterested in returning them. Her husband doesn't notice the loss. He's content to generate sound and movement. He's a thrashing fish shedding electrical impulses, but she isn't lured. She isn't a shark--hungry or otherwise. She waits for the thrashing to die down and moves on.

Are there other islands? She knows there must be, but she doesn't know how to get to them. There's a lot of open water between here and elsewhere, and it's easier to sink. The depths are always close and ready for her. Her bones are used to the pressure, and in the dark the flickers of bioluminescence are like distant stars. She has a horizon of hungry lights signaling lures, signaling escape. She swims slowly through the dark and counts them.

Teeth (I)

Her stomach twists and collapses on itself, and her teeth feel too big for her mouth. She has shredded lips and cheek lining. She needs something to gnaw on. Lacking this, she gnaws herself, and this constant movement damages all of her mouth parts. Jaw muscles exhausted, tongue worn smooth. There's nothing she can't erode.

She's a tide washing cliffs to sand, eating continents.

She dreams of her teeth falling out and being replaced by an endless stream of newer, sharper teeth. The old teeth she swallows. They rattle in her guts, sit inside her like stones, wait for her acid to dissolve them.

Teeth (II)

She dreams about swimming and about being bitten by innumerable, invisible fish while she swims. She leaves the water covered in lacerations, missing slivers of skin and fat and muscle.

In the bedroom, she covers the biggest wound. She must guard against infection. She fumbles for medicine, gropes for a bottle of pills she knows should be there, but her fingers can only wrap around a trinket box full of fossilized shark teeth. She takes two and feels them dive through her, feels them take root in the walls of her guts. She swallows more, emptying the box into her mouth until her stomach's lined with teeth, ready to shred whatever finds it way to them.

Stranded

She's an island, and the sea is everywhere-- a ring tightening around her. She's alone, and she's not afraid. She's tired of waiting. She dips her toes into the restless foam, encouraging. Tells the sea to hurry.

She decodes the fizz and crash of the sea's response: *I'm going as fast as I can. Why don't you come to me?*

Dana explains that she'd like to, but she can't. She can wade out until breaking waves slosh around her calves. Then the air grows prickly, dense, thorny. An impassable hedge. An unscalable wall. She beats against it until her fists bruise and swell. She stands in the surf and chants *hurry hurry hurry*.

In the distance gulls shriek and wheel, pierce the skin of the water and rise. She watches them do this again and again and again while the water around her whispers *patience patience patience. I am coming for you. I will come.*

Feast

Waves lap at her borders. Hiss and foam and spit at her. They leave her things. Wood and garbage and bits of shell and knots of weed and plastic. Piles of jelly glistening in the sun. A whale carcass bloated and straining against itself.

She had prayed for sustenance. The sea provides,

She slits the taut skin of the whale's belly and opens a door for herself. Empties the whale of the machinery that sustained its life until there's room for her. She enters the room. It's a chapel of meat and blubber and bone. She gives praise. She gives thanks. She scrapes free a modest portion and eats.

This temple will last, she thinks. Will last until she's sated. She will eat and give thanks until the tight sinews loosen and the vault of bone sags and the flesh ripens. It will become a feast for things other than her. She will not take more than her share. She will not outstay her welcome.

The sea takes back what belongs to it.

Tunnels

She's underground. Swimming through miles of flooded tunnels. There's no way out. Water made a path for itself but not for her. She can't seep through cracks like it can, so she's wedged in a crevice. Can't move forward. Can't push herself back the way she came. Caught in the vice grip of limestone, she thrashes and gasps. Drowns but doesn't die, and she blames herself for her foolishness. She belongs in water but is not water. She can't flow, erode. Her acid is too weak to digest stone. How presumptuous she was, how arrogant to come this close to dry land, to think she could wiggle beneath the skin of the earth like a guinea worm and not expect to be pinched, rolled up, crushed by all this solidity, by all this non-buoyant weight.

Cleaner Fish

She can't feel the barnacles crusting her limbs, studding her hips like a girdle. They're the first to cling to her, but not the last.

She's a friend to parasites. Her skin thick enough to host a legion of flukes, copepods, isopods, leeches.

After a while she itches where the parasites have burrowed into her skin-- the tissues inflamed and angry.

She courts groomers. Goes where they gather and circles them slowly, slower, until some take notice. Now, a host of remoras cling to her belly, a fleet of even smaller fish trailing behind her like the train of a gown.

They don't get rid of the itch, but they ease it.

Migration

She finds a sea mount, its bones furred with algae. Thickets of kelp and bladderwrack. Encrustations of barnacles. Protuberances of coral colonies waging slow war for sunlight and space. She circles. Small fish dart between holes in the stone and gaps in the coral. They flee from her as they flee from everything larger than them.

The light here is brighter than she's used to, and the water isn't as heavy, as close, as capable of holding her up. She swims slowly, rising with every lap. At the surface, she braces herself and breaches where the mount pierces the waves. The stones are rounded and slick with spray, streaked with bird shit.

She rests, watches the birds. The birds ignore her. Preening cormorant and gull and albatross call to their sisters circling overhead. Diving for whatever small things come too close to the surface.

She doesn't stay long. This place isn't for her.

Boat

She's on a trawler lit by a single, piercing halogen as pale as a moon, as bright as a sun. She can't look directly at it, can only see its reflection in the gentle swells slapping at the hull.

The light is a lure. The water teems with squid and forage fish come from the depths. They school restlessly around the boat until bigger fish scatter them. Needlefish as long as her arm hunt the light, pierce the surface as they leap for the halogen. One strikes her chest, its long jaws lodged in her sternum like a thrown knife.

There's no pain. Only breathlessness. She wraps her hands around the slippery body and pulls until she can breathe again. The fish thrashes, narrow jaws darkened with her blood. Gill covers spasming in the suffocating air.

She carries it to the side of the boat, drops it into the water. The wound in her chest is already closing. Bone and muscle and vein knitting themselves whole again.

And all around her fish, hungry for light, thudding onto the deck. Dying faster than she can throw them back.

Noctiluca

She floats in the gentle swells of the incoming tide. Body softened by salt, skin porous and luminescent. She laps at the shore, and the foam glows with her light. She's in bloom. Her light gilds the lip of every breaking wave. Her light stains the calves of waders, the fishermen and tourists. It has endured storms only the sea remembers. She has endured. She will endure.

Deep Diver (II)

She leaves the shallows for the last time, swimming away from shore until the continental shelf plunges into the depths. The open ocean unfolds in every direction, and every direction is home. She chooses one.

She dives deep. Deeper. There's no end to this. No bottom. The twilight depths swaddle her. Hold her. Its arms wrap around her tight, tighter, and she curls into them. She is rocked by loving currents as she sinks. The water swallows the last of the blue light. She closes her eyes in the dark.

Everything is water. Is salt.

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About The Author

Stacey Gruver is a poet and artist who lives and works in Baltimore. Visit her website at staceygruver.com.