

“10,” Woody Allen, Bo Derek and Me

Here's the beach scene, for she did agree to go to the beach with her son and me before I leave. Imagine, watch. This exquisite woman walks away (flows more than walks) towards the surf, loosens her white robe. It drops to the sand. I sit with her son at the foot of the life guard's perch, to which the dog, white patches on white as beach sand, is tethered. I am short, Jewish, thinning, curly hair -- although still more curls than thin. And, I watch as, just before she enters the water, she briefly, momentarily, tugs downward at the bikini bottom, as if it had enough material to cover more modestly. With forefinger and thumb, she tugs, as if a tic, a muscle-seizing memory of some former Riviera life.

The kid hates the beach; only the pool he will use. She dislikes his swimming in the pool, where too many others have been; doesn't want him in be-pissed pool water. I make a deal. With me, the boy would come to the beach. We would play in the sand, fly kites; she would swim. The dog searches for unfound treasure in the sand. And she swims, her hair floating behind her on the waves, like blond kelp, covering her shoulders as they disappear beneath the foam: Botticelli's Venus in reverse.

The life guard notices. The moment we decamp at the foot of his station, he notices. A robust fellow, a preternatural adolescent, perhaps now forty, bronze skin and dyed thatchy black-rooted white hair in disarray, like Pick-up-sticks; loose porcupine quills, white shafts, ebony roots. His paunch reflexly retracts as certain women pass. He jokes with the ladies and the children. But, S., he notices. He has enough French for badinage.

He, leans over the balustrade -- both his belly and the balustrade strain as he watched her enter the sea. Like some cartoon character, a Roger Rabbit, his bugged-out eyes boing out of their orbits.

But, he doesn't notice her begin to disappear on the far side of the reef, past the waves that flipped children. The lifeguard warns the children and occasional adult to stay ahead of the reef and waves, towards the beach, alee. The undertow works silently, stealing away its victims. Even as you stand, the water rips away the sandy foundation beneath your feet. "Sweeties" (as the guard calls all children), c'mere, c'mere, I want to see you!" his refrain. The waving, leaping kids almost obey, then are lured back, just out of reach of the waves' stealthy embraces; the life guard again calls "Sweeties!" A rhythm to their routine, like the waves. A *pas de deux* with Neptune.

I see her enter the surf, buoyed up, then dip below sight and buoyed again, as I play with him, digging sand channels to the sea, as if to welcome the waves, enclose, tame them. And I turn away, toward the dog, periodically, disentangle it from its leash. And I look again, uncertain if I can see her. And I look again. And I feel cold fear in my belly. Had she found me to care for her child so that she could, like some Euridyce-mermaid, return to the sea? I, like some Jewish Orpheus, find her disappearing from my sight.

Until I can not find her.

I call the life guard, but *sotto voce* so that the boy won't be alarmed. (Is this why he refuses to go to the sea with his mother?) The guard looks,

raises his binoculars. We both see the speck of her as she sails west into the afternoon setting sun.

“Mrs.! Mrs.! Tel Aviv is south, to your left,” and he points, helpfully, left. Even now, he can loft a joke to a beautiful, disappearing woman.

She hears. She returns.

Had she been trying to reach Nice, leave me with the kid? How would I have explained that to the world? “Here is my new son, whom I inherited from a woman who floated into Neptune’s arms.”

Emerging, she looks the Botticelli, her eyes cast slightly aside in modesty, like Venus, as if to fend off the eyes of others.

She loves the sea, she explains. (Does she see the residue of alarm in my face? A need to explain?) She feels boundary-less, unbordered, unencumbered, contiguous with the schools of fish. In the water, her skin loses its boundedness. She feels united with the sea.

I feel relief.

Kid seems to notice nothing amiss; used to it?

Now crepuscule approaches, that time of sunset when the sky and sea lose their membranous separation in the distance. In Hebrew, the difference between the words for water (*mayim*) and sky (*shmayim*) is but the sibilant “sh”; at crepuscule, this “sh” dissolves and sky and water become one, like two people after a quietly passionate moment of love, one still within the other, the other embracing the one.

On the restaurant's patio, we finish the St. Denis fish, the kid the chips and nak-nikim, tiny hot dogs, dipping in ketchup. The dog, done digging for chips in the sand, retches from stern to stem, revealing his ribs. He leaves remnants of dinner and sand beneath the neighbor's table. We leave.