Metagestures

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The Gesture of Loving

[C]omplete absorption in the other without loss of the self,... exactly this moment is love. At the existential level of love, the tipping over into another, which makes “I” and “you” into “we” ...
— Flusser, Gestures, 51

He sat on a log on the beach in the drizzle and watched the water fall toward him and pull back out again and he saw that the water had fingers that tried to grip the sand as it was dragged back into the sea and he saw tendrils in the foam on the sand as the watery women put their heads and faces down and flung their hair out to try to reach him, just a little bit, just for a little bit, before they had to leave again.

He was lonely.

He saw long patterns in the water as it crashed, wet limbs draped in mermaid plaid and velvets, skipping or crawling or tangled up hot and sliding, and he heard them speaking watery languages in watery voices, and he scooped a wet bed in the sand and nestled his seminar copy of Lawrence’s Women in Love — his professor, he knew, would understand — and he covered it over and fashioned a little sandcastle-cocktail-glass
above it and left it as a gift for the mermaids and he got up and brushed the sand from his seat and moved toward dinner.

He came here often. He had buried a little library in the waves, marked with sandcastle-cakes and sandcastle-candles, romantic offerings left for the sea and the women with the foamy hair and the saltwater fingernails. He did not know if he loved them. He did not know, not anymore, what being in love was meant to feel like. And still he went to class, and he came here, and he left gifts for his sandcastle library, and he brushed the sand from his clothes, and he left. He tried to imagine the sea reading stories from his treasured copy of Ovid — he had begun burying the Metamorphoses chapter by chapter — between forkfuls of shepherd's pie suppers and sips of gin and tonic.

One late afternoon he came to the beach with his rapidly-deteriorating copy of Metamorphoses and thought he might read Ovid's flood story to the waves. As he settled in, however, he glanced to his left and noticed a fairly large structure that had risen from the sand since his last visit. It was a damp sandy slice of a common storefront, a sandcastle-shop fronted by a driftwood sign glued with pink pearls spelling the word “Psychic.” Underneath the driftwood was a smaller note attached somehow to the sandy wall above a sandy doorframe: “Madame Gavorski,” it said in glue and crushed seashells. “World-Renowned Mentalist. Walk-ins Welcome.”

Hanging from the doorframe was a curtain of beads made of tiny single sand grains strung together he knew not how. He waved his hand through it and the beads came unstrung and he closed his eyes and walked through a sheet of falling sand and when he opened them again, eyelashes strung with tiny sandy beads, the curtain had somehow re-formed behind him. It smelled like saltwater and vanilla and fish and musk. Just inside the room, an old woman sat at a small table surrounded by glass objects. To her left was a deck of Tarot cards, and when she held one up he saw sand-beaded eyelashes blinking at him through a pair of delicately painted angel's wings on an impossibly thin sheet of glass. (When she put the card back and shuffled the glass deck, the sandy room was full of crisp glassy tinkling.) To
her right was a small crystal ball. In front of her was a teacup full of seaglass and bits of mirror.

She placed a glass card in from of him, face down. And then another, and another.

She wordlessly turned over the first card. Painted on the glass was a woman turning into a tree, and he recognized Daphne from the first of Ovid’s stories he had read to the waves.

She turned over the second card, and he saw snakes curling up from the ground and recognized Medusa from the second of Ovid’s stories he had read to the waves.

When she turned over the third, he saw the sun and remembered the third story—of the tragic death of Apollo’s son—he had read to the waves.

One by one, she placed each glass card on the table. As she turned them over, one by one, he saw that this was a Tarot deck made entirely of The Lovers, each card adorned with a figure from the stories in the pages he had buried in the beach.

She gathered the cards together, and shuffled them again, and placed the deck in front of him.

The stack was no longer glassy and translucent: he saw a delicate pile of the thinnest slivers of pearly turquoise. Madame G. held up three fingers, and Will turned over three cards in sequence. He read across them, and the images began to tell a story.

As his gaze traveled down the first card from top to bottom, he saw a shapely stockinged leg being caressed by a pair of large strong hands.

The second card showed only an open glossy pair of lips and a chin dripping with some sort of dark pink juice.

The third card showed the blurred image of a sheet of paper covered in a curving script scrawled passionately.

In each card he recognized a gesture. Obsession. Desire. Confession.

He looked from the table to Madame G., who looked from his eyes out past the sandy walls and toward the water. He nodded to her, understanding.

As the lonely young man got up to leave the quiet old woman, she handed him a fourth card and closed her eyes and mimed
sleep, and he understood that he was to keep this card under his pillow.

When he exited the sandcastle and looked down at the thin flake of blue stone in his hand, he saw that it was The Fool.

Will went home that night and pulled his laptop into bed with him and typed three pages. One page described the tiny feet of the first woman he could remember feeling obsessed with. One page was full of the sensory memory of the restaurant at which he and his second crush lunched before making love for the first time. One page was filled only with punctuation: he had given away all the words he had for his last love, and could now recall only the stops and the pauses and the breaths between declarations. When he was finished, he printed out the pages and placed the Tarot card beneath his pillow and closed his eyes.

When Will woke up the next morning, he gathered the blue dust from the sheets — he had destroyed the delicate card in his sleep — and eased it into a plastic baggie and left his apartment.

He arrived at the beach, opened the bag, and sprinkled the little pieces of pearly blue into the sand around him. And then he settled in, and took out his three printed pages, and began to read the first to the water.

As he intoned tiny phrases about tiny toes and tiny toenails, the surface rippled up in tiny little waves to catch his words and bring them into the water. He got up and moved closer, and as he looked out at the sea he thought he saw a watery woman with webby feet speeding away from a large fish that chased her in hot pursuit. She seemed to be smiling, from what he could see, but it was all over so quickly that he was already losing the image of her kicking legs when he looked down and noticed a blue high-heeled shoe wash up on the sand. He picked it up and turned it over, frowning at the odd finny shape of the toe, and took it back to his blanket, and pulled out the second of his pages and began to read.

The air filled with the smells of cabbage and sausages, and the waves took on the color of mustard, and again he got up
and moved closer to the water’s edge and looked down into the brown-yellow froth to find two figures with pearls for eyes, a man and a woman, gazing at each other while taking lusty bites out of seashells shaped like apples and marshmallows and then taking bites out of each other before sinking together into the sand in a hot tangled froth. He was still staring after them when something tumbled against his toes, and when he picked it up he marveled at what looked to be a sea-blue strawberry with a bite taken out of it. He took it back to his blanket, and pulled out the third of his pages and began to read.

Here there were no words. Here his voice was silence. But his eyes took the punctuation into his body, and his body brought it into the sand, and the grains became commas and ampersands that made stops and pauses and long asides in the water and again he got up and walked to the edge of the waves but when he looked down, this time, he saw only his own reflection — but no, it was the reflection of a memory of him, and as he looked he thought back to that moment, when he was writing his first love-note to his last love. He was startled from that memory by a sharp prick on his leg, and when he looked down he saw a dribble of blue ink running from his ankle, and when he picked up the offending object he found a long pen made of turquoise. He brought it back to his blanket, and used it to sign the three printed pages — the cartridge was full of sea water — and he took them to the water and gave them to the waves, and he wrapped the shoe and the strawberry and the pen up in his blanket.

As he got ready to leave the beach, he glanced to his left and noticed the familiar sandcastle-storefront with the familiar signage, and he walked over and made his way inside to offer the three sea trinkets to Madame G.

A sheet hung, this time, from the doorframe — it was slick and dark and woven from seaweed and crystallized with salt and he lifted it aside to find a young woman at a small table crawling with crabs. To her left was a broken Tarot deck, and when she held up a misshapen card he saw thin green fronds where her eyelashes should have been, blinking at him through a hole in the opalescent fragment.
To her right was a large clamshell. In front of her was a wine-glass full of pearls.

He did not recognize her.

She put the card down, and lifted the glass, and opened her mouth, and tilted its contents inside. After some sucking and some chewing, she spit a pearly mass onto the table, and kneaded it like dough, and spread it out across the surface, and brought her teeth down to take card-sized bites and spit them out into her hands until the table was clean. She kept her fists clenched around the cards and looked at him, and waited.

He unfolded his blanket and placed his gifts in a row on the table in front of her: the shoe, the strawberry, the pen. She unclenched one hand and dropped the three cards she had been holding, each in front of one its corresponding objects: Obsession. Desire. Confession.

He looked on as she used her free hand to bring shoe, strawberry, pen, and their matching cards into her mouth, along with a crab or two, and crunched and cracked and squeaked and when she opened her lips to smile at him he saw that she had pearls for teeth and a mussel for a tongue and when she breathed out she made little blue puffs. She opened her other hand and placed three pearly cards face down in front of him and then closed her mouth and stopped smiling and held his gaze.

She put her hand on the first card and looked at him and shook her head. Understanding, he picked it up without turning it over and he gently put it into his pocket.

She then flexed a fingernail and scratched it across the surface of the second card, and she brought a finger dazzled in pearl dust to Will’s mouth and brushed it against his lips before moving it, in turn, to her own mouth and sucking it clean. Heart nearly beating out of his chest, again he understood, and picked the card up and put it into his pocket.

Watching him watching her, she met his gaze and matched his rapid breathing with her own, in and out over and over until she saw his eyes fluttering — until they both dizzied with the tension — and she scooped the third card off the table and smashed it against the clamshell and closed her eyes. Again he
understood, and swept up the shards of the final card and put them into his pocket.

And so, Will left the young woman to seek his next three gestures. Waiting. Seduction. Surrender.

That night he went home and lifted his notebook and a pen into bed and he wrote three pages. On one page, he remembered the way his last lover looked, from across the train station, on the morning when she had come to see him from very far away. On one page he remembered what she smelled like later that day while he was pushing the strap of her dress from her shoulder and leaning in to kiss her neck. He left one page blank, not having the language for what came next. He placed the pages under his pillow, along with the three cards the young woman had given him, and he closed his eyes.

Will woke the next morning — still, his sheets glowed with blue dust — and he pulled the pages from beneath his pillow. When he searched for the cards, his fingers found only three tiny bulges. He swept them out onto the sheets, and saw three small pearls: one in the shape of a brooch, one the smallest of perfume bottles, and one in the shape of a very tiny ear. He scooped them into his pocket and grabbed the pages and brushed his fingers through his hair and left his apartment.

He arrived at the beach, settled in once again, placed the first of the three pages in his lap, and began to read to the water.

As he gave the image of his waiting lover to the sea — brown eyes, cold skin, shivering lip, fingers on suitcase — he saw the seaweed come together, rising to the surface and weaving itself into a velvety green column that fluttered from water to sand and washed up against his feet. He lifted the scarf — just like the one she wore, only salty and speckled with sand — and wrapped it around his neck and shoulders, and pulled out the second page and began to read.

His whole body blushed as he tried his best to tell the sea of the sharp musky smell of warm neck that crawled from his nose to his throat to his fingers as he nudged his lover’s silk from her skin and he had only gotten part of the way through when a
scent rose from the waves and drenched his skin and settled in
his lungs and he kept it there for later.

He took the third blank page from his notebook, and took the
three pearls from his pocket, and wrapped them in the paper,
and walked to the edge of the water, and Will threw his pearly
package as far as he could into the sea. He stood there for some
time, thinking about what he might have written on that page,
until he felt soft wet salty fingers circling his ankles and pulling
him into the water. Unable to resist, Will walked into the waves
until they covered his shoulders, and he grasped at his scarf as it
came unwound, and he held his breath and closed his eyes as he
went under. When will opened his eyes, still submerged, he saw
a sandy mound before him, fronted by a sandy door that was
hung with a familiar sign. “Psychic,” he read in pearls, and when
he quickly looked for them he spotted the three that he had giv-
en to the water, and he plucked those free and pocketed them
while pushing his way through a curtain of suckered tentacles.
Once inside, Will found himself standing before a very young
girl seated at a table that was covered in the largest octopus
he had ever seen. The girl stroked the creature’s head with one
hand, and with the other she beckoned him closer. He sat, and
he breathed in the scent of shiso leaf and plum, and he breathed
out the perfume that the sea had given him. The girl swallowed
it and nodded and the memory of the scent of the neck of Will’s
lover crept into her own neck, and as she bent it toward him he
gathered the seaweed-scarf from his shoulders and wrapped it
around her, and she nodded. Then the girl took her small hand
from the octopus and held it out before him, and he took the
three pearls from his pocket and placed them in her palm. She
fed them to the creature on the table, and she looked up at Will
with octopus eyes, and her forehead began to bulge and her skin
took on the color of the sand around her and when she opened
her mouth he understood that he was to reach inside. And so he
did, and from inside of her he pulled a handful of pebbles.

He turned to leave, and threw one of the pebbles in front
of him. It grew into a tree whose branches broke through the
top of the ceiling. Will climbed them, and when he reached the
the gesture of loving

Still underwater—still underwater—he floated another of the pebbles out away from his body. He watched it expand into a balloon, and he jumped into its basket and gulped its air as it rose through the water. Once the balloon had broken the surface, Will tossed the rest of the pebbles into the sea. They grew into an improbable cobblestone path, and he lifted himself onto it and followed it all the way to the shore.

Waiting for Will on the beach was a woman from his seminar. She was reading from his copy of Women in Love and sipping from a martini glass that appeared to be made of sand, and when she saw him she smiled and beckoned him over.

They still walk down that beach sometimes, hand in hand. And sometimes, if they’re there at just the right time, Will swears to her that he can just make out three figures rising from the sand together in the distance: an old woman made of glass, a young woman made of pearls, and a little girl with an octopus for a head. Sometimes, he whispers to his love, he’s sure he sees the women walking toward them. And when he whispers this, she always laughs, and pulls him toward her, and kisses him all over his face. And always, he looks back toward the women made of glass and pearls and tentacles. And always, always, they’ve gone.