

# Freshwater Dreaming

Illustration from the *Encyclopaedia Londienseis*, engraving by J. Pass, 1817

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**I**T IS A COMMON MISCONCEPTION that mermaids dwell only in the ocean. In fact they live in rivers too. The seas that surround this great southern continent are for the most part inhospitable to her—in the south they are icy and wild, lashing themselves against rocky shores, and in the north prehistoric beasts still glide through the thick brine like darts. Those beasts will store what they cannot eat and a full belly is no deterrent to a hunt, though to use the term ‘hunt’ is misleading, given that they are the oldest and most successful predators on earth. ‘Kill’ is the more accurate term. Over millennia, mermaids have migrated inland against the current of narrowing estuaries to warmer, stiller waters. But here again the ineptitudes of language confound me—to say ‘still’ is incorrect. The word ‘river’ should not be a noun. A river is in constant motion, drinking mountain streams and feeding the ocean and whatever forms its tributaries might take; bleeding into irrigation channels. A river is never the same river if you should happen upon it twice. For that matter you are never the same person, such is the process by which the cells of your body fall away and are regenerated. In fact, any word that claims to own a thing with a name is a misnomer. Nothing can be named because nothing can keep still. How we dance and disappear in our earthly composition. But as does the river, I digress.

If you have ever seen a mermaid—and I have, because as children we used to camp on the bank of the Murray where the great river swerves in a southerly direction towards Echuca, and because I have always had a habit of seeing things that are not meant to be there—then you’ll know that it is easy to mistake her for something else. People who do chance to see her ducking under the surface as their motorboat careens along assume they are seeing girls swimming in the river who will eventually climb out onto the bank and gather up towels and sandals. They cast their eye about for belongings, scan the bank for a colourful tent. Could it have been a dolphin? Or a giant Murray cod, the likes of which they imagine tugging at the end of their line. They turn back to look along the course of the river, squint into the glare and pull their hats down over their brows. It is a surprisingly clear, blue day and the esky, full of ice, is waiting.

But let us leave them to Sunday recreations and take a moment to envision the creatures of which we speak. Riverine mermaids are barely recognisable from the storybook version of their oceanic counterparts. Their amber eyes are very wide-set and refract light like the eyes of a crocodile. They have dark brown skin, semi-transparent in parts and sheened with algae. The clear divide of fishtail and human torso is never so definitely marked as you would have

MERMAID.



*Mermaids exhibited, successively in the Years 1758, 1773, & 1794.*

Engraved by W. B. Woodcutters, & Printed by J. Smith, 1794.

J. Smith, del.

seen it illustrated, and a freshwater mermaid may have a patch of scales along her cheek or running down her neck. Her flesh parts are not so fleshy as human flesh, but thicker and reminiscent of that of a porpoise. She grows human hair, matted and woven with flora and river salt, and often in places you would not expect to see it on a woman: down the line of her backbone, across her shoulders like a buffalo, hanging under her chin like an ordinary billygoat.

The first mermaid I saw did not see me. From all accounts studied, mine was a significant sighting, particularly as it occurred in shallow water and the mermaid displayed the ability to sit up and forage for food. I have sought to have my account published but it is not easy. The editors of aquatic journals assume mine to be the writings of a madman, and discretion prevents me validating them with my good name. My wife has tired of my research.

‘Gordon,’ she says, leaning in the frame of the study door, ‘why don’t you leave your women for now and come to bed?’ For a moment I see myself as she must see me, bathed in the blue light of the computer screen, thin hair wild, unbrushed for days. I meet her eye and tell her that I will come soon.

I was lucky to secure the love of a kind woman before my obsessions overtook me. More amazingly still is that when I do come to bed, inevitably hours later than could ever be considered soon, she will allow me to take her in my arms. She might even roll towards me and put a hand on my tired face. She will feel how dry and cool my skin is, how rough the regrowth of my beard, and I will remember then what it is to be human.

Freshwater mermaids do not swim in schools. The quantity of food required to sustain a single specimen necessitates a life of lonely hunting. She fossicks in the river grass alone, pulling shrimps from its blades and trawling the riverbed with her fingers. On rare occasions, however, when one mermaid should happen upon another—swimming after a school of rainbowfish or diving for ribbonweed—then she is likely to display social tendencies. Among mermaids there exists a certain fascination, a playfulness usually common to animals existing in family groups. They will circle and chase one another as dolphins might do, sometimes for days. But the demands of subsistence ensure that these trysts are always short-lived.

I remember. Her fingers trace the labyrinth of a river-softened root network. The eucalypt’s body is silent and anchored, weightless in death. It arched from the bank long ago and water flooded its veins. The girl pries the root fingers. She is looking for something. Pointed vertebrae ridge strangely under the

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skin of her back and she is naked. From the bank, with scabby feet in scrubby grass, I am watching her. A wooden boat hangs from my hand. The girl hears something I do not hear and turns suddenly, sees me. Her pupils constrict into two black stripes, but she holds my gaze. I look at her and she looks at me, sees me, sees through my clothes and my hat and the wooden boat, sees through my skin and bones and heart to what I am. I am twelve and my life will warp in focus around this point. She is holding something, a snail, which she pushes into her mouth. A grasshopper crawls up my leg and then she is lost. She is lost but I will return.

In fact, I will return at every chance, in my daydreams and imaginings and in the life of study I choose. On every holiday I will convince my family, initially my parents and then my wife, to return with me to this point. I will drive my children to the Murray on long weekends and spend so long with the unbaited hook at the end of my line that my wife chastises me—she knows, after all—and the children tire of my poor company and find other men to play father to them with boats and jet-skis.

‘Gordon,’ says my wife one evening. It is a sad, learned necessity for her to address me with my name or run the risk of me not looking up from the desk. With a concealed effort I raise my head and meet her eye. Likewise, I have learned the small decencies that make a madman co-habitable.

‘Yes?’

‘I would like to take a holiday.’

I consider her on the couch with her feet tucked under her. She is wrapped in a shawl and wears spectacles to allow her access to the thoughts of Flaubert, rendered in tiny font across the pages of her book. Reading may not be her activity of choice tonight, or every other night for that matter, yet my own habits leave her little choice.

‘We holidayed at Easter.’

‘I’d like to go somewhere new,’ she says. ‘Overseas.’

I open my mouth to object but she continues.

‘We can afford it. We should go while we are still young,’ and then she laughs a self-conscious laugh that I have not heard for a long time. Is this a conversation she has worked up the courage to initiate?

‘Well,’ I say, and I fold the pages of my book over my index finger. I focus my eyes on the point between hers. It is possible to do this without the other person realising you are not looking into the blacks of their irises. ‘That is something we should definitely consider.’

There aren't any mermen. I don't know why. The mermaid has the reproductive organs of a fish hidden under her scales and she mates with cod and eel and carp and bears fish children, more often than not holding no resemblance whatsoever to her human part. Her fish children will swim away from her as soon as they are hatched; tiny, faceless minnows. Fatty milk will leak from her breast and rise to the surface where it casts a little shadow through the water like a cloud.

In September I will present papers at a conference in New Guinea over four days, but it is not the holiday Janice imagines. I arrange it without consulting her. It is unfair. The Association of Aquatic Studies arranges our accommodation and I do not request additional nights. I book our flights and she accompanies me, hands folded over Nabokov in her lap. Her head is turned out the aeroplane window to watch Adelaide become an incredibly small space beneath us, small enough to cover with a thumb. Janice, martyr Janice, accompanies her wilful husband, who, on unspoken notice, is now operating on borrowed time. Christmas comes and we pack the car for the Murray.

On the banks, children unfurl tents and inflatable boats from bags. They dig for yabbies in the clay and plummet from rope swings, scrambling with their frog legs into trees and over rocks. Our own children have long since grown up and I have almost lost track of how many grandchildren I have. We invite their families to accompany us camping but they decline. They are going to Noosa, Canberra, Anglesea. My wife likes the sound of these places.

At night, when campfires are burning and the mermaid is hunting, snatching fish from the water and grubs from the reeds, young people emerge from their campsites with wine in their blood. We hear them from our tent but I am listening for the sounds beneath the sounds. Their bare toes taste the current and they shriek and laugh. The mermaid slips into the shadows, watches them with her eyes above the surface. Legs and bottoms and bellies meet the water and reflect the moon. The mermaid sees the slim hips of the men. One of them lunges forward, dives head first into the shimmering darkness, and his female friends cry out in delight. When the man emerges, the mermaid sees his broad shoulders and his strong thighs and the river beads on his chest.

A shy creature to whom hiding is innate, the mermaid hibernates during winter and spends the warmer seasons of the year underwater. She traverses the deeper stretches of the river, surfacing briefly for air where overhanging gums

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cast dark shadows. Mermaids do not have gills—it is an unfortunate swindle in the fish–woman hybrid. In summer, if the camping grounds are full and water levels low, the mermaid must swim for long periods without coming up for air. Accordingly, she spends a portion of her life in a kind of subaquatic dreaming as the held breath in her lungs converts to carbon dioxide. Beasts of the past slip by her in the water and the riverbed glows with phosphorescence.

But I myself am dreaming, extrapolating. There are things we will never know. The mermaid floats at the edge of my world, resisting the current with a slight movement of her tail. My professional life swims as close to her as possible without slipping into her eddy. I research around her, drawing perilously close. Sometimes I wonder when my true thesis will be exposed. But for now I am on holiday.

I sit on the bank with my rubber shoes in the reeds and feel my neck burning slowly. This morning I applied sunscreen but have left the tube at camp. For four hours I have been sitting in this place and now I am a man possessed, a gambler at the pokies loath to leave his post. All day I will wait for one sighting and the probability of that sighting occurring at any moment is the same, although it is marginally higher as the hours of twilight approach and fractionally higher still with every hour that passes without a sighting. My wife is at the campsite, sitting in the shade of our annex. I cannot see her from where I am but know she is wearing her camping shorts, which she hates and has worn every Christmas for as long as I can remember. She is leaning back in her fold-out chair and a large novel is open across her knees. She is swatting at a mosquito.

On hot December nights the mermaid will drag herself up onto the pale clay beaches of the Murray and cake herself in the stuff. She will let it dry in thick clumps in her hair and stain her flesh in rich terrestrial umber and ochre. The smell of the mineral fecundity on her skin is intoxicating. The mermaid licks at her forearms and eats handfuls of clay from her body. The moon swings up and the stars prickle into a glass blue night. Her barking laughter slides sticky, slow as dusk, into a melancholic moan. And I hear her. I alone hear her.

That night Janice and I lie side by side in our tent. It is erected on the roof of our four-wheel drive and two airbeds fit comfortably inside. Outside the night is dark and wild and we can hear the scurries of nocturnal fauna, the movements of campers, and other unnameable noises that bespeak the mysteries of the Murray. My ears are finely tuned to that music. I wait, feeling my whole body and the car beneath me and the world beyond us ring with false but utter

silence, waiting for her voice. There is the occasional splash of a flying fish. Janice turns and the car creaks on its suspension.

‘Gordon,’ she says, pulling my focus to the interior of the tent. She has been listening to the silence within its walls. I cannot respond. My mouth is dry. I cannot respond but my breath tells her what she knows anyway, that I am also wide awake. She will go on to say something I already know—whether she says it now or later is unimportant. She is alone in the world and I am no longer enough. But my ears are closing to her voice and opening again to the sound beneath all the other sounds. My mind is entering the underwater world, submerging in its slippery warmth and rising up into the silvery black night.

‘Gordon,’ she says again. **M**