

My Life with the Wave

By: Octavio Paz

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 When I left that sea, a wave moved ahead of the others. She was tall and light. In spite of the shouts of the others who grabbed her by her floating skirts, she clutched my arm and went leaping off with me. I didn't want to say anything to her, because it hurt me to shame her in front of her friends. Besides, the furious stares of the larger waves paralyzed me. When we got to town, I explained to her that it was impossible, that life in the city was not what she had been able to imagine with all the ingenuousness of a wave that had never left the sea. She watched me gravely: No, her decision was made. She couldn't go back. I tried sweetness, harshness, irony. She cried, screamed, hugged, threatened. I had to apologize.
- 2 The next day my troubles began. How could we get on the train without being seen by the conductor, the passengers, the police? It's true the rules say nothing in respect to the transport of waves on the railroad, but this very reserve was an indication of the severity with which our act would be judged. After much thought I arrived at the station an hour before departure, took my seat, and, when no one was looking, emptied the tank of the drinking fountain; then, carefully, I poured in my friend.
- 3 The first incident arose when the children of a couple nearby loudly declared their thirst. I blocked their way and promised them refreshments and lemonade. They were at the point of accepting when another thirsty passenger approached. I was about to invite her too, but the stare of her companion stopped me short. The lady took a paper cup, approached the tank, and turned the faucet. Her cup was barely half full when I leaped between the woman and my friend. She looked at me in astonishment. While I apologized, one of the children turned the faucet again. I closed it violently. The lady brought the cup to her lips:
- 4 "Agh, this water is salty."
- 5 The boy echoed her. Various passengers rose. The husband called the conductor:
- 6 "This man put salt in the water."
- 7 The conductor called the Inspector:
- 8 "So, you've placed substances in the water?"
- 9 The Inspector called the police:
- 10 "So, you've poisoned the water?"

- 11 The police in turn called the Captain:
- 12 "So, you're the poisoner?"
- 13 The Captain called three agents. The agents took me to an empty car, amidst the stares and whispers of the passengers. At the next station they took me off and pushed and dragged me to the jail. For days no one spoke to me, except during the long interrogations. No one believed me when I explained my story, not even the jailer, who shook his head, saying: "The case is grave, truly grave. You weren't trying to poison children?"
- 14 One day they brought me before the Magistrate. "Your case is difficult," he repeated, "I will assign you to the Penal Judge."
- 15 A year passed. Finally they tried me. As there were no victims, my sentence was light. After a short time, my day of freedom arrived.
- 16 The Warden called me in:
- 17 "Well, now you're free. You were lucky. Lucky there were no victims. But don't let it happen again, because the next time you'll really pay for it . . . "
- 18 And he stared at me with the same solemn stare with which everyone watched me.
- 19 That same afternoon I took the train and, after hours of uncomfortable traveling, arrived in Mexico City. I took a cab home. At the door of my apartment I heard laughter and singing. I felt a pain in my chest, like the smack of a wave of surprise when surprise smacks us in the chest: my friend was there, singing and laughing as always.
- 20 "How did you get back?"
- 21 "Easy: on the train. Someone, after making sure that I was only salt water, poured me into the engine. It was a rough trip: soon I was a white plume of vapor, then I fell in a fine rain on the machine. I thinned out a lot. I lost many drops."
- 22 Her presence changed my life. The house of dark corridors and dusty furniture was filled with air, with sun, with green and blue reflections, a numerous and happy populace of reverberations and echoes. How many waves is one wave, and how it can create a beach or rock or jetty out of a wall, a chest, a forehead that it crowns with foam! Even the abandoned corners, the abject corners of dust and debris were touched by her light hands. Everything began to laugh and everywhere white teeth shone. The sun entered the old rooms with pleasure and stayed for hours when it should have left the other houses, the district, the city, the country. And some nights, very late, the scandalized stars would watch it sneak out of my house.

- 23 Love was a game, a perpetual creation. Everything was beach, sand, a bed with sheets that were always fresh. If I embraced her, she would swell with pride, incredibly tall like the liquid stalk of a poplar, and soon that thinness would flower into a fountain of white feathers, into a plume of laughs that fell over my head and back and covered me with whiteness. Or she would stretch out in front of me, infinite as the horizon, until I too became horizon and silence. Full and sinuous, she would envelop me like music or some giant lips. Her presence was a going and coming of caresses, of murmurs, of kisses. Plunging into her waters, I would be drenched to the socks and then, in the wink of an eye, find myself high above, at a dizzying height, mysteriously suspended, to fall like a stone, and feel myself gently deposited on dry land, like a feather. Nothing is comparable to sleeping rocked in those waters, unless it is waking pounded by a thousand happy light lashes, by a thousand assaults that withdraw laughing.
- 24 But I never reached the center of her being. I never touched the nakedness of pain and of death. Perhaps it does not exist in waves, that secret place that renders a woman vulnerable and mortal, that electric button where everything interlocks, twitches, straightens out, and then swoons. Her sensibility, like that of women, spread in ripples, only they weren't concentric ripples, but rather eccentric ones that spread further each time, until they touched other galaxies. To love her was to extend to remote contacts, to vibrate with far-off stars we never suspect. But her center . . . no, she had no center, just an emptiness like a whirlwind that sucked me in and smothered me.
- 25 Stretched out side by side, we exchanged confidences, whispers, smiles. Curled up, she fell on my chest and unfolded there like a vegetation of murmurs. She sang in my ear, a little sea shell. She became humble and transparent, clutching my feet like a small animal, calm water. She was so clear I could read all of her thoughts. On certain nights her skin was covered with phosphorescence and to embrace her was to embrace a piece of night tattooed with fire. But she also became black and bitter. At unexpected hours she roared, moaned, twisted. Her groans woke the neighbors. Upon hearing her, the sea wind would scratch at the door of the house or rave in a loud voice on the roof. Cloudy days irritated her; she broke furniture, said foul words, covered me with insults and gray and greenish foam. She spat, cried, swore, prophesied. Subject to the moon, the stars, the influence of the light of other worlds, she changed her moods and appearance in a way that I thought fantastic, but was as fatal as the tide.
- 26 She began to complain of solitude. I tilled the house with shells and conches, with small sailboats that in her days of fury she shipwrecked (along with the others, laden with images, that each night left my forehead and sunk in her ferocious or gentle whirlwinds). How many little treasures were lost in that time! But my boats and the silent song of the shells were not enough. I had to install a colony of fish in the house. It was not without jealousy that I watched them swimming in my friend, caressing her breasts, sleeping between her legs, adorning her hair with little flashes of color.

- 27 Among those fish there were a few particularly repulsive and ferocious ones, little tigers from the aquarium with large fixed eyes and jagged and bloodthirsty mouths. I don't know by what aberration my friend delighted in playing with them, shamelessly showing them a preference whose significance I prefer to ignore. She passed long hours confined with those horrible creatures. One day I couldn't stand it any more; I flung open the door and threw myself on them. Agile and ghostly, they slipped between my hands while she laughed and pounded me until I fell. I thought I was drowning, and when I was purple and at the point of death, she deposited me on the bank and began to kiss me, saying I don't know what things. I felt very weak, fatigued and humiliated. And at the same time her voluptuousness made me close my eyes because her voice was sweet and she spoke to me of the delicious death of the drowned. When I came to my senses, I began to fear and hate her.
- 28 I had neglected my affairs. Now I began to visit friends and renew old and dear relations. I met an old girlfriend. Making her swear to keep my secret, I told her of my life with the wave. Nothing moves women as much as the possibility of saving a man. My redeemer employed all of her arts, but what could a woman, master of a limited number of souls and bodies, do, faced with my friend who was always changing—and always identical to herself in her incessant metamorphoses.
- 29 Winter came. The sky turned gray. Fog fell on the city. A frozen drizzle rained. My friend screamed every night. During the day she isolated herself, quiet and sinister, stuttering a single syllable, like an old woman who mutters in a corner. She became cold; to sleep with her was to shiver all night and to feel, little by little, the blood, bones, and thoughts freeze. She turned deep, impenetrable, restless. I left frequently, and my absences were more prolonged each time. She, in her corner, endlessly howled. With teeth like steel and a corrosive tongue she gnawed the walls, crumbled them. She passed the nights in mourning, reproaching me. She had nightmares, deliriums of the sun, of burning beaches. She dreamt of the pole and of changing into a great block of ice, sailing beneath black skies on nights as long as months. She insulted me. She cursed and laughed, filled the house with guffaws and phantoms. She summoned blind, quick, and blunt monsters from the deep. Charged with electricity, she carbonized everything she touched. Full of acid, she dissolved whatever she brushed against. Her sweet arms became knotty cords that strangled me. And her body, greenish and elastic, was an implacable whip that lashed and lashed. I fled. The horrible fish laughed with their ferocious grins.
- 30 There in the mountains, among the tall pines and the precipices, I breathed the cold thin air like a thought of freedom. I returned at the end of a month. I had decided. It had been so cold that over the marble of the chimney, next to the extinct fire, I found a statue of ice. I was unmoved by her wearisome beauty. I put her in a big canvas sack and went out into the streets with the sleeper on my shoulders. In a restaurant in the outskirts I sold her to a waiter friend, who immediately began to chop her into little pieces, which he carefully deposited in the buckets where bottles are chilled.

Translated by Eliot Weinberger