



Horse

Medoruma Shun

translated from the Japanese by

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On the far edge of the beach north of the village was a rock formation jutting up about ten meters high, known as Black Point. You could actually call it a small island, since when the tide came in it was cut off from the land, the waves swallowing the rocky causeway that led up to it from the shore. When that happened, getting there was tough, even with a boat. It was only forty or fifty meters away from the land, but the current was strong, and if you steered off course your boat would run into the submerged rocks.

It wasn't any easier approaching from the other side. In the water past Black Point was a flat rock we called Bird Rock, and the current between the two was so fierce that even the local fishermen avoided it. Maybe it was the rocks underwater that made the flow so powerful. Once the current had you it would pull you out to deep water before you had a chance to think, and getting back to shore was nearly impossible.

One time a high school kid was showing off and trying to swim to the rock from shore, but before he could even make it halfway the current caught him and dragged him way out to sea, where I saw him get pulled under. Another high schooler who was also watching ran to the houses up the beach for help, but it was too late. That night my dad smacked me around, and the next day at school my teacher did too. But the terror of what I had seen stayed with me longer than the pain from any beating. Once the high school kid realized he was caught, he turned around to us with a look of utter despair. He tried frantically to swim back to shore, kicking and stroking with everything he had, but he was pulled off to the side and out into deeper water. He was treading water, screaming for help. I could see his face clearly, so rigid with fear that he couldn't have cried if he wanted to. I've never been able to forget that look, or the desperation in his voice.

After that kids were forbidden from going anywhere near Black Point. For at least a little while, no one even went to the beach. But when spring came around and people started fishing for the groupers laying their eggs between the rocks around Black Point, us kids would rush to the beach after school and elbow in between the adults lined up with their rods. At first they scolded us but soon they got caught up in the excitement of their fishing and let it drop. After two festive weeks the groupers swam off and the adults stopped coming. The rocks became our domain once again. We hadn't forgotten about the death of the high school kid. But it could no longer keep us away. As spring slipped into summer, we would spend long days swimming in the shallows until we were all tired out, then make our way to the tip of the rocks and while away the time fishing.

One morning I didn't go to school because I had a boil on my hip and had to go to the clinic. The treatment didn't take long. They just lanced the boil, drained the pus, then dressed it with gauze. My mother said I didn't have to go to school, so I hurried to the beach. School wouldn't be out for a while yet.

The tide was low so I made my way over to Black Point and dropped my fishing line into the water, staring blankly at the sea. The sun's rays reflected off the seabed, making the water shine aquamarine. When cloud shadows scudded across the surface the look of the water changed. A gull that had been perched on Bird Rock flew off. My eyes lazily went to where it had been.

I realized there was someone there, hanging onto the side of the rock amid the crashing waves. It was a man – his hair was long, and his skin had been burned dark by the sun. He seemed to be resting. After a while he took a deep breath and plunged back into the water, swimming toward me. The high school kid's face flashed in my mind, that moment he had turned to look back at us. I jumped up to my feet, still clutching my rod. The man was coming closer. Several times it looked like the current was about to take him, but he calmly adjusted his course and continued. Once he was within ten meters he made one final push, never lifting his head from the water.

The ledge was too high for him to climb. He grabbed onto an outcropping and hung there, gulping air as the water buffeted him around. When a large wave swelled high up the side of the rock face he rode it and pulled himself out of the water. He had a rope tied around his waist, and as he clambered onto the rock he tugged the other end roughly, hauling a blue nylon net out of the water. It landed right next to him. He lay there a while, his brown back heaving.

I noticed there was something alive, squirming in the net. A large octopus. It thrust a couple of its legs out through the mesh, gripping the rock with its suckers. The spotted creature pulled itself along in hopes of escaping, but it was anchored by the weight of the man's body and could only make it as far as the rock's edge. The octopus huddled there, glistening in the sea spray.

I knew who the man was the moment I saw him out there between the waves. He lived alone in a hut on the beach, in the wind-break grove of ironwoods. He was the only person in the area who wasn't afraid to swim out to Bird Rock. I didn't know his name. We

all just called him the crazy guy. I had no idea why he lived by himself out in the woods. I heard his dad died young, but his mom was still healthy and living a perfectly normal life at his older brother's house in the village. I heard she brought him meals from time to time. That's all I knew, and while I wanted to know more, I wasn't about to start asking him questions.

Once I had a good look at him I could see that he was much younger than I had thought. He couldn't have been older than his late twenties. His hair was plastered to the rock, giving off a smell like rotting coral. He lay there face down until the last droplets of water on his back dried.

When he finally got up he moved slowly, as if testing each muscle individually to see if it was working. He looked at me with glazed eyes and moved his cracked lips.

"D'jou see th' horse?"

He was speaking in thick Okinawan. I shook my head, not knowing what he was talking about. The man looked out toward Bird Rock and started talking again. When I dove down to the base of the rock, he said, I felt something moving in the water behind me and turned around. Right in front of me were the hindquarters of a black horse, galloping past. No head and no body, just the hind legs, jet black and rippling with muscles like bundles of bamboo joints. Its hooves lashed the water and its streaming tail glistened in the boiling wake. After a few meters, it vanished.

The man stopped talking and just stared at me.

His eyes looked overripe, like they might burst and ooze out of his head. But behind his thick gaze I could clearly see the scene he had described. Muscles wrapped in lacquer-black velvet, firing like pistons and repelling the water all around. Heavy hooves battering the water as if it were solid, as if to smash it to pieces.

The man didn't look back at Bird Rock again. He peeled the trapped octopus off the rocks and started to climb further up, look-

ing completely exhausted. I didn't necessarily want to follow him, but I didn't want to be left there alone, so I scrambled up and over Black Point, wading back to the beach through the waist high water, several paces behind the man. When we got to the ironwood grove and he turned to head in, I felt a sudden urge to follow. But when I took another look at him, plodding along, spotted tentacles hanging limply through the net, I quickly changed my mind. I lost sight of the man as he moved deeper between the tree trunks, his face downcast. That was the last I ever saw of him.

About two weeks later there was a rumor going around that the man had disappeared, leaving all of his belongings in the hut. One day when my friends and I were headed to the beach, we saw a police car stopped in front of the ironwoods. We almost never saw the police out and about in our village, so we headed eagerly into the grove. There were two officers in uniform, a middle-aged man in a polo shirt with wrinkles etched into his face like scars, and four young guys in police caps, all standing around an old woman. It was the missing man's mother. While nervously answering the questions from the men she kept looking into the hut. We made our way up to the yellow police lines, and one of the uniformed officers waved us away. When we didn't leave, he came toward us with an angry look on his face, so we scattered and ran off.

The whole time we were swimming we kept talking about what was going on in the ironwoods. After a couple of hours we came in and rinsed ourselves in the spring that bubbled out from the rocks. When we headed back, the police car was gone.

No one said anything as we made our way into the trees. It was still bright out but inside the grove with its carpet of brown fallen leaves the air was chilly. The police cordons were still up and we slipped past them without hesitation, but no one seemed to want to open the door to the hut. As usual when we were somewhere we shouldn't be, we milled around, waiting to see who would take the lead. Someone shouted suddenly to try to scare everyone else. We sized each other

up. Because the man had spoken to me on Black Point, my curiosity started to get the better of me. The others sniffed this out pretty quickly and started to push me toward the hut. Before I knew what was happening, I was standing in front of the door.

I smashed the rusty lock with just a few blows from the small hoe leaning against the wall. Still being pushed from behind, I peered into the hut. Bands of light cut across the room, coming in from gaps in the wallboards. There wasn't much in there, aside from some fishing equipment lined up neatly along one wall. The floor was nothing more than bare, thick plywood propped up on cinderblocks. At the far end was a tatami spread over some beer crates, which was probably where he slept. A blanket of indeterminate color was rolled up on top of it. We had all imagined we would find the man's blood-soaked corpse inside, though no one had said anything like that for fear of being laughed at. We almost immediately lost interest in the drab little hut.

Someone said, let's grab the fishing stuff, and everyone agreed, but no one made any move to take anything. While we were trying to cajole one another into doing it, we gradually started to feel uneasy being there, and everyone was hoping that someone else would suggest that we leave already. Time passed, and the light coming in through the cracks faded. The stars started to appear in the sky, which was darkening between the sparse leaves of the ironwoods. Someone said, the cops'll probably be back soon, and no sooner had they said it than we all ran. Half giddy and half terrified, we burst out of the grove and dashed home on the white sand paths between the sugarcane fields.

It seems it was the man's mother who first realized that he was missing. She had gone to visit several times but found no one there, and after more than a week of this she began to worry and went to the police. He had disappeared before, but she had the sense that this time was somehow different, and apparently she raised a real fuss.

The next day the police and the fire department organized a search. My friends and I went to the beach as soon as school was out and watched the boats plying slowly back and forth out on the reef. Every-

one knew that the man used to dive for fish around Bird Rock. They would act like he was out of his mind, saying "that crazy guy is the only person who would fish out there," but really they were impressed. Naturally the search party focused on the area around Black Point and Bird Rock, but it was tough going, and even the professional divers in full scuba gear looked like they were about to be carried off by the swift current.

The search went on for three days, but they didn't turn up anything. It was possible that something had happened while the man was fishing and he was dragged out to sea. Or maybe he had just wandered off, like he had done so many times before. Almost everyone in the village thought it was likely the latter. Even those who had eagerly helped with the search at first were clearly losing patience by the third day. I was in bed and heard my father come back drunk, cursing the man and his family. Meanwhile I was thinking about the black horse the man saw. Maybe he had seen it again, under the waves.

A black horse with no head, no body, just the hind legs pounding the blue-green water, churning past him.

I imagined the man watching the horse. I felt something cold deep inside of me. It was a long time before I could fall asleep.

Several days later I went alone to Black Point. On the way I stopped in the ironwood grove. The police cordon had been removed, the bottles and tools lying around the hut had been taken away, and the doors and windows were boarded up.

It was low tide, so I was able to pick my way across the rocks to Black Point without even getting my shoes wet. A warm, damp wind blew off of the sea, carrying a scent that made my mouth fill up with sweet-tasting saliva. It was like the water was alive, all one creature, with its own consciousness. I went to the farthest point of the rocks and stared out at the deeper water.

Waves crashed ceaselessly around Bird Rock. The base of it had been worn away over long years, and the rock appeared to be floating over the white water. I recalled seeing the man appear from amid the foam

and spray, and the scene seemed to once again materialize before me.

Just then the thin clouds split. Sunlight came pouring through, turning the dull gray sea turquoise and cobalt wherever it touched the water. The light continued coming in, enveloping Bird Rock, dyeing the water as it came, shining over Black Point and up to the woods on the beach. The whitecaps from the waves shone so brilliantly that I couldn't look directly at them.

I saw something black beneath the waves, coming slowly toward where I stood. It had appeared from under Bird Rock, moving steadily, shimmering in the flow of the current. The vivid green of the water pierced my eyes as I watched the black, spindle-shaped mass come closer. The sight of it held me rooted to the spot, trembling. Then it was just a few meters in front of me.

For just an instant I could clearly make out the galloping hind legs of a black horse. A wave swelled up high, broke, and came crashing down. I braced my body against it and kept my eyes wide open. I thought I had caught a glimpse of the man, leaping through the wave. But when I looked down, there was only the green water, completely transparent and seemingly bottomless. I was drenched, and suddenly exhausted, so I drew back from the ledge and curled up in a hollow among the rocks.

When I looked around again it was almost completely dark out. Fear spread through me like a swarm of insects. I clawed my way up and over Black Point. More than half of the rocks leading back to the beach were submerged, and the waves were dancing around the tops of the rest. As I stood there watching, the sea turned from gray to black. Hesitation bubbled inside me, but when I thought of the scene it would cause in the village if I went missing, I plunged in.

Before I was even halfway across I regretted my decision. The trail of rocks that had looked passable only a moment before was now swallowed up. I pushed off the rock I had been perched on and swam desperately toward where I thought I saw the next one. Nothing was there. My fingers only clutched vainly at the tepid water, and in those

moments of faltering the waves started to take me. I cast around in a panic for something to grab onto but found nothing. Up until then I had kept my fear in check, but now it spilled over. I knew I was being swept away. I swam as hard as I could but kept drifting farther from where I wanted to go. I wanted to cry. I thought vaguely that I should have taken off my shirt and pants. My heart screamed in terror and I swam as hard as I could, but countless soft arms were pulling me ever further from the rocks and shore.

Then the water all around me turned unexpectedly cold. My body went limp. The waves covered me and I sank slowly down. The sea was pitch black. I couldn't see a thing.

But something was there. A sudden force thrust upward from underneath, lifting me above the waves. I could feel powerful muscles working beneath me, rippling through my chest, my stomach, my thighs, as I clung on to that smooth back. I don't know if it was the black horse or the man who had vanished. But I believed that, whatever it was, it was taking me back to shore, and I felt myself growing calm. I closed my eyes and pressed my face to those cold, firm muscles.

After a while I looked up at the sky. The stars were like shimmering eggs freshly laid by some leviathan. They pointed out to sea.