They say she displeased her father but no one really remembers the why of it, just that she was thrown from the high white cliff into the sparkling sea below. There was not even a splash as the thrashing sea swallowed her up in an instant mouthful. Backs turned and walked away as she sank down, her eyes still fixed above, silver fish darting out of her body’s way, green seaweed slipping over her carelessly until she came to rest on the quiet sandy seabed.

No one wondered about her as the sea licked her flesh off with its sandpaper tongue leaving gleaming white bone behind, her ribs arching out of the sand like giant clasped hands. No one remembered her as orange crustaceans and purple anemones made homes in her gaps and crevices. But she wondered about them all as she stared up, coral red starfish in her eye sockets, dreaming quietly as the sea and dappled light gently lulled and rocked her.

Many years later, when her father’s kingdom was remembered as a whispered threat with rumours of ghosts in the bay, a young fisherman set off early one evening in his canoe driven by hunger and high hopes for a good catch. He was well prepared with a sturdy canoe, pitch caulked against leaks, carefully checked nets and tested paddle. The sun was slowly sinking into the evening mist and the sea was flat as he quietly paddled out, sea birds squalling in circles above him, a good omen. There was need for a good catch as winter was coming, the sea would soon freeze and it would sleep under its ice blanket until spring.

A mile off shore he stood up smoothly, his young muscles balancing him easily, and in one fluid motion he swooped down and gathered his nets, flinging them out in a wide arc and watched with satisfaction as they settled without snarls or tangles into the water, the rock weights slowly sinking them down. He laid back in the boat and closed his eyes, enjoying the sun’s warmth on his cheeks, his soft black beard slightly itching. He pulled a bone flute out of his pocket and played an aimless tune and let his thoughts drift as the canoe rocked gently, anchored by the nets. Because hunger had made him old before time, he thought as an old man would; the dangers of the long winter ahead, the endless darkness, prowling polar bears, the loneliness of the ice, the alarm bells of sickness and injury, the pain of a hungry belly and black chilled fingers and toes, frozen hair that snapped in the cold wind. His young heart could not dwell on fear long and he thought with excitement of the winter festival when the clans would meet, there would be fire, light, laughter, drink, food, stories and fights but most of all there would be company. Last year, he had been too shy to lay claim to a girl by seeking her in the dark, invitation in her worldly eyes as he sought permission to hold and kiss her like the other young men his age, but this year he was ready. He had outgrown the embraces of his mother and yearned for something hotter, something that he could melt into and be more than himself alone. The canoe listed to one side as there was a tug and he sat up, looking around, afraid his catch was being stolen.

The sea was calm, the last of the sunlight skimming across its smooth surface so the tug came from below and the young man started pulling the nets up, excited in his anticipation of a big catch. Such a tug, it could of course be an unlucky rock, he reasoned, in which case the net might be broken and need long hours of mending, but then again, maybe a curious seal had sneaked in and he was lucky. Up he pulled, there was weight attached, not a lot, but some, so perhaps not a seal but at least an artic char or two, their rosy pink flesh signalling good eating to come. His stomach growled and he pulled faster.

Her pearly white foot bones came over the hull first, a winking hello, rapidly followed by the long bones of her legs, arms, pelvis, ribs and a mess of small bones all jumbled together, entangled in the net. Not understanding, he kept hauling and then her skull appeared, scraps of long hair still clinging in matted strings, like rotten cat gut and for a moment he stared into her coral eyes and she grinned back at him, her teeth still shiny and smooth, glinting in the evening sunlight.

He screamed and dropped the nets, grabbing his paddle and rowed frantically to shore, static white noise filling his mind. On the floor of the canoe, she stared up at the sky relishing the warmth of the sun after the bone chilling cold of the depths.

She heard the crunch of gravel as the canoe hit the beach at speed, the thud of his feet as he leaped out and took a step or two before turning back and cursing, hauled the boat up the pebble beach out of the sea’s reach. Felt him pause a moment, knew he was debating leaving his nets in the boat, his most precious possession, his livelihood, before he grabbed them and after giving them several violent shakes to try and shake her out of them, he ran up the beach, the nets trailing behind him, panic making him clumsy. He did not look at her, no matter, they had not looked at her when she was last on land either. If she could have, she would have smiled and closed her eyes, lifting them to the sun, glorying in the warmth and wonder of the world.

On he ran, his nets spreading behind him, her head bumping the ground, her bones bouncing along like dry beans in a hot pan. She watched as they entered the village, her leg bone taking out a rack of fish drying in the sun, an arm bone knocking over an earthen jug of fresh water. He had stopped screaming and she could hear his ragged breath as he ran. He arrived at his home and dived in the door, throwing his nets in one corner and sat huddled in the other, whispering to himself. It was dark and cool in the hut, she could see the giant whalebone jaw and rib bones, gleaming against the dark mud sod, curving above her forming the structure of the house and she felt welcomed.

A match was struck and lamp lit as the exhausted young man built up the fire to prepare some food which he ate quietly, his eyes studiously avoiding the tangle of nets and bones in the corner. She watched the shadows on the wall in the companionable silence. Belly satisfied, he leaned back and sighed and half shut his eyes and a memory drifted up to him of his mother, dressed in her best seal furs, hair neatly braided, crooning over the ancestor bones under the last full moon of the year, her fingers smoothing red clay paint over the skulls as she touched them with reverence and prayed for another year of protection. He glanced at the mis mash of bones snarled up in the nets and felt his not only his mother’s cold eyes but also the row upon row of ancestors ranked behind her. It might as well have been fire as a wave of hot shame washed over him. He may not have meant to catch her, but this was no way to treat her now.

A light came near and she was surprised when she felt herself being gently lifted, piece by piece untangled from the nets, his voice almost a caress, ‘you poor, poor creature, so many years in the sea, forgotten. Who were you? How long have you waited to be found? Well I see you, I see you now.’ Like a mother, he crooned a half remembered lullaby as he carefully laid her out as she should have been in life. Frowning in concentration, he brought out furs to dress her, ‘so many years in the deep, cold wet, there is no worse, not even the bluest ice. Well you will be warm now, my lady.’ She gazed up at him, nestled within skin, admiring his strong fingers, the smoothness of his black hair, the oiled brown wood colour of his eyes. Satisfied with his work, he took the empty nets closer to the fire’s light to mend the torn threads and jagged ends, looking at her from time to time.

She watched as his eyelids dropped and then jerked open again and for a moment she wondered if now, having had his fun, he would gather her up and throw her out like detritus from a meal. As if on cue, he stood up and came towards her and if she could, she would have stiffened in fear. But he slipped under the furs, facing her, his dark beautiful eyes staring at her and soon, they closed in sleep. She watched him as his breath slowed and became a gentle snore, his lips moving, eyes dancing behind closed lids. She saw something shimmer and it was a tear nestled in the hollow of his eye, liquid salt crystal. An urge to taste it swept over her, an incredible thirst from a parched throat she did not have. From deep within she summoned the will to knit her bones together and MOVE. The first movement was jerky, like a sudden gust in a wind chime and she was startled. Had someone come in? His lips parted as if to kiss, making the tear tremble and she was emboldened. Her next attempt was better and she rustled closer. Like a baby, he slept on. With a determined heave she was face to face with him, her bones pressed against his chest, her domed skull nudging under his prickly bearded chin. The tear trickled down into the smooth curve of her eye socket and she felt herself expanding, awakening as from a deep sleep. Her arms crept around him and she clasped him to her, strong white bones pressing into his body.

With each sleeping breath of his she took form, smooth skin covering the bones, rosy flesh filling out beneath, warm fat curving out her hips, buttocks, belly, breasts and cheeks. He moaned and she held her breath, the pressure of it inside her newly solid chest thrilling her. She felt her breath coming in and out of her mouth, other secret openings forming below. The urge to create new life swept over her, spreading warmth to the tips of her new hair, fingers and toes and she pressed tighter. This time he returned the pressure and they tumbled under the furs, limbs entwined. As the night deepened and chilled, there were two breaths frosting the air above the heap of furs.

She felt watched before she was awake and her eyes snapped open. Staring back at her were his beautiful brown eyes, drinking in the smooth curve of her cheek, her fine arching eyebrows and abundance of long glossy black hair that tumbled between them like a stream. What a catch he thought. It must be a dream, but if so, he would happily live in it. She smiled at him and his heart hurt with the pleasure of it and he leaned towards her for a kiss. As he held her he thought, she completes me, filling holes I did not know I even had and she sighed as she relaxed against him, thinking I can be myself with this man.

‘I am hungry,’ she said.

He smiled and replied, ‘I am a good hunter.’

Smiling at each other, he pulled her upright and together they walked out into the sunlight.