

MERMADIA

Dylan Carpenter

today, my unapologetic legs
stroll down pavement that will
be here long after I am gone and
I use my satisfactory lungs to
savor every molecule of the
autumn air that is fixed in its freshness.
seasons are much like scales on a fish:
already dying from the moment they take shape.
and I wonder why ice has those same properties;

if my own body would tragically dissolve
when left in the ocean long enough.
but children's books still tell the tale
of tails so much different than ours.
like how a mermaid's bottom half can
sparkle — completely star-crossed.
what kind of fate do the cosmos tell about plastic,
then, when such an entity seems deathless like a star?
or about the way the waves stand just a little higher each year,

on their tippy-toes beating against foreign walkways.
if a fish were to stand on their tippy-fins, gasping for air,
dwindling like a season, shedding scales and hope entirely,
what kind of book cover would suit them best?
would children still envy the sea?
good news is like Atlantis to me.
constantly searching for a buoy to tether myself to,
but sometimes I go overboard before I get the chance.
I spiral in gyres and shiver under coolcurrents —

with nothing but my useless legs. but how lucky I am
to inhale grievance and exhale sympathy. that my own lungs
will never know what it's like to live in a place where the air
is grainy and the space is hostile. how lucky
I am to be scaleless, gill-less, clueless.
it is said that we know more about space than
we do our own oceans, perhaps because it is
more exciting to look through every corner of
a treasure chest than a trash can.

but I wonder if mermaids know anything about us —
whether we are the aliens that have come to exterminate them
or just another unforgiving god. what if some alien race decided
to sprinkle wrappers on our heads until our babies' babies
had bendy straws for arms and plastic bottles for hearts,
cycling microbead after microbead throughout their
cardioplasicular system? I wonder how I would fair with a tail —
and should I come across the Mariana Trench, I wonder what I would do.
to go deeper, confronting the unknown, or to press my back against another

familiar sand bar full of yesterday's grocery bags
and rotting friends and family. I hear the beeps
from the self-checkout aisles and feel the rustling of
synthetic bags under my fingertips. how one
man's grocery run can be another mermaid's cause of
death. I become wrapped
up in thoughts like these. a net that follows me everywhere,
capturing me over and over again — setting me free,
catching me, stabbing an ice pick through my head,

feeding me to the masses, repeat, relentlessly.
yet, like words on a page, dew on a perfect amphibian,
it may get old but never dull. more than anything I pray
that mermaids are not real. because the plot
they would find themselves in is crueller than
anything any storybook could ever draw up —
because the treatment that real-life characters just like turtles and dolphins,
you and I are experiencing is simply unreal. so, after the fairytale ends,
I sigh, with tired lungs:

relief that it was all just fake, synthetically speaking

let down that I am beached in my own impotence.

noting that mermaids are the safest in our minds.