

## Delu

We looked at ourselves, pink and delicate in the oxygen,  
*Are you scared? Yes!*

We were together for six years after that.

We both worked at the factory, Eos Fabrica. We met when we were eighteen, our first week of work, rolled out of different schools, and into the job. Most people on the island worked there, or worked somewhere connected to it. It was our industry, our work, our world.

Back then Delu scoffed at the thought of people wanting to leave the island, but five years later Delu left the island.

Our eyes had met over our induction, while the foreman was shouting over the noise of the mineral, which itself was shouting as it began to submit to the chemical processes it was subjected to, shouting in crunches, before it might shatter, before it might explode under the stress.

*But this should never happen*, the foreman shouted. And while this didn't happen Delu held my gaze, and I felt the crunchy squirming of mineral between my legs

*When mineral melts it is neither solid nor liquid, When it is most solid it is most rigid, it is most fragile. It can't roll with the punches*

*How do you feel?* The foreman said. *Ready for some lunch*

That first day we stayed behind, took off our fresh overalls, still crisp after only being worn for a single day, agreed with a look to also take off our underwear. Crept back to that first room, and lay down on the cold stone floor of the factory.

*This is the way it works*, the foreman told us, *I'll keep it simple to begin with*, and my eyes glazed over, I remembered him or someone like him telling me this on a school visit. Every student enrolled at the schools on the island visited the factory, just as every newborn got sent a jersey from the football team.

Years later I asked the foreman, Gil, if it had been him doing that induction to the school children. *Probably my father actually*, he replied.

He pulled the mineral from the vat, just as his father had done, in a line as clean and as clear as the sound of a flute, thick and viscous. Iridescent and with the texture of honey.

*Think of it as a dialogue with the material, a negotiation. The mineral doesn't necessarily want to make some of the shapes we want it to make.*

He cut it with scissors and it simultaneously became elegant. Fragile and rigid and transparent.

*We leave this here, on these hooks.* Hooks that didn't look any more complex than coathangers bent to serve a function. And in fact the first fishermen had made their own hooks when they first started experimenting with the mineral.

I'd often wonder at work, when I was laying out the mineral, what made the first people do that, who tried forging the first hook, who ate the first mushroom, who wondered if rustworms would reinforce mineral, giving it a flexibility, tensile strength and stiffness, or modulus as they called it upstairs in Research, like no other material? Presumably someone who'd known someone else who'd died eating one.

It's so animal this instinct, I'd imagine our ancestors exploring this island with their noses pressed to the ground like pigs after truffles, their asses in the air.

For the demonstration we all wore goggles so we could see the rustworms on the mineral. I could feel Delu looking at me through the glasses.

*Then we let the rustworms do their work.*

We watched through the tinted lenses as the tiny orange shapes began to fidget on the curlicued surface of the mineral.

*We leave these little guys here for a couple of hours, upstairs in Research they reckon that they are trying to mate with the mineral.*

The head nodded upward toward the research department was a gesture you became familiar with fairly soon after starting work at the factory. Those upstairs, those above us, those that make the decisions that dictate what we do.

After working there for two years Delu decided to take the training so as to be able to work upstairs. Felt trapped by having to do the same thing everyday, didn't have the love I had for

the rhythm of the factory floor, the time it gave us to daydream.

The same constant rhythm apart from the summers, which were spent cleaning the machinery. As Delu and I were smaller we were given the task of crawling inside them, I remember us tickling one another, trapped inside the enabler.

Because of the way the process worked, the shifts were tidal, we worked when the sea didn't. Went swimming when the sea was working. Or at least until Delu started in Research and did office hours rather than shift work.

I loved those first two years. Working till the weekends when we'd hit the town with the rest of the factory. Straight from the factory, straight from clocking off. Leaving in convoy, cars with their flags fluttering. We'd leave on the motorbike, me wrapping myself tight to Delu's back. You look like a baby in a papoose, Gil laughed from his car, as my head fitted so well between Delu's shoulder blades.

Downtown we'd drink until we vomited then kiss then drink until we vomited again then kiss again. Two years later I was still happy with this routine. Delu wanted to push toward something more domesticated, people in relationships walk more carefully through life.

*Later we increase the oxygen level in here, which is our cue to leave.* As we apprentices shuffled out following Gil, I instinctively tried to stand close to Delu. There was a book we were given with information in, I don't think I ever looked at it again.

*Consciousness of risk makes you ask yourself about your own limits,* the foreman said, quoting from the book I think. *And of course the limits of the material too, the limits of the mineral.*

While he spoke our soon to be co-workers, individuals in orange overalls, entered the space we'd vacated and quickly arranged other mineral structures.

Whenever I'm now tasked with hanging the mineral, I can't be in there without looking at where Delu and I had lain, waiting for the water. Looking up at the crystalline circuitry of the mineral, imagining the rutting rustworms that were about to be obliterated.

*Mac tells me that everyone does it,* Mac was Delu's older brother who also worked at the factory. We lay there, I could feel the sweat sticking me to the floor, the foam of the sea broiling towards us. Relinquished control. Waited.

*Fear is learnt,* Delu said,

The foreman made a loose wave with his hand to indicate the passage of time.

*Then we let the sea water in. It reacts with the rustworms and the oxygen, destroys the rustworms, but they've already done their job. And their obliterated bodies and any other crud from the factory is cleaned away by the sea. Then the water leaves through the backdoor. We help it along a bit, make sure it goes the way we want it to.*

Our eyes looked to an orange shutter, the paintwork chipped, but the rubber lips that held to the walls and floor looked new and watertight.

*This factory has been here for sixty years, the water remembers what to do.*

The foreman added.

On day one, of the job, of our relationship, of my life it seems. When the water started roaring through the tidal gates of the factory, Delu looked at me, winked.

Then the water carried us away. The black sea ripped us through the factory. Like air through a harmonica we surged through the exit gate and into the sea proper, we were carried with the chemicals and the colours, with the bobbing spheres of the mineral that weren't yet set, with the tiny eviscerated carcasses of the rustworms, into the ocean. I felt Delu's body crash into mine, before lithely kicking into a swim. I flapped my arms beneath the water, thrashed my legs and pushed to the surface.

The tide carried us past the caves and hollows of the cliff face whose dense darkness we investigated by torchlight in the following years.

I realised where I was, or I was able to see where I was beyond the billowing ocean, when we floated past the military base, and the velvet causeway next to it, the road from which many people chose to drive straight into the sea. Nearby was the slaughterhouse and I saw the seagulls hovering above it in the twilight.

After passing the abattoir we decided to swim to the shore, I knew bloodcove would be quiet, and it turned out to be close to Delu's place. We kissed as we staggered, naked out of the water, our limbs slimy with the effluence of the factory and animal blood.

*Salthead*, Delu called me, after we kissed, as I tasted so much of the sea

We crept naked, back to Delu's house. The dirty tarmac rasping the soles of our feet. Eating

windfall lemons we'd passed on the way back, a delicious antidote to our saltlick-furry throats.

*This is my second favourite taste*, Delu told me  
*What's the first? I'll tell you later.*

That day rolling along the wave I saw the twin lighthouses, Blackhead and Whitehead, either side of the island. Delu had grown up in a lighthouse, and told me that the mercury leaking for the lamps had sent her parents mad and they'd tormented both Mac and Delu until they had to run away to the cottage at bloodcove.

This wasn't true I discovered a week or two later when Mac told me that their father and mother had simply retired to the mainland.

Soon I had moved in with Delu, Mac moved out and we had the place to ourselves. We domesticated ourselves, dug out the black soil around the house to make a vegetable garden, the dark soil was blue under our fingernails as we saw and felt the ecosystem collapse around us.

On the island we tried to deal with the increasingly palpable environmental fallout of the work of the factory. The island had been rotting awhile, but was constantly augmented by new technology. Like we had started breeding rustworms decades ago, we thought we could do everything, that there was always a fix, a way to intervene and steady the process. The island had gotten rich. We had independence and wealth, but at what price, but at what place.

There are things you can't see, things you can't eat. There are fish you can't eat. And now there are fish you can't see. The factory have always been open about the process, they have been transparent about what went in the water, and that this knowledge gave us choice.

But it was obvious from the motor-oil coloured soil that the foundations of this assumption were flawed. We levelled the land around our house so that we might grow food. Watched the tender green vegetables push through that anti-landscape.

We made their island our own, explored every cave and opening we could find. The crunch of the stones of smugglers beneath our feet, disturbing the bones of those who wanted to circumvent the laws of the merchants who settled our island. We swam in that filthy sea, made love in the dirt of our allotment.

Some nights we'd lie on the beach watching the lighthouses, watching the communication between the land and water.

*The light tells you where the land is when you are on the water. The land is saying to the water, I'm here, I'm here, I want you but don't come any closer.*

Each lighthouse has its frequency. It's own rhythm of speech.

*The code is a light  
The light is a code*

We'd go down to the beach, swim off bloodcove, we thought of it as 'our' beach. The oil of the rocks, stained our feet and hands, branding us, we belonged to them. We loved one another like these stones, smooth, solidly, unthinkingly. We lived on the island, surrounded by water, I let the water mark the edge of my aspirations whilst Delu was looking beyond it.

Eventually the job upstairs meant Delu spending more and more time training on the peninsula, which is what we called the mainland. I think Delu saw it as a way to save the island, to make new instruments to better understand it, to better control what was happening; to measure is to master for Delu.

Under our now different coloured overalls we wore t-shirts, Delu a singlet, me a crew neck that always seemed to be splashed with cereal from breakfast. That last morning Delu smiled at me, straightened the collar of my overalls and kissed me on the cheek, took a plane. We had both cried a little. I went to the factory by bus, Delu had taught me to drive the motorbike but I wanted to keep it special, something we'd do together. I don't think Delu would have felt the same way about it.

I carried on working downstairs in the factory. Laying out the mineral, or in the rustworm farm, or with the oxygen tanks. Throughout the day I'd walk tentatively, we all did, we'd learnt to walk differently once we'd laid out the mineral, more conscious of our bodies and of other's bodies in that big space. Walking like that every day meant tiptoeing like dancers through the rest of life.

On the phone to Delu I would dance down to the pink rocks at bloodcove and look across to the mainland. We split up in one of these phone calls, with the fetid sea licking at my toes.

Delu wrote to me once after we split, a simple message simultaneously terse and sentimental,

*I miss you most when I think of these three things:  
The vegetables The factory The sea*

You are most vulnerable when you are at sea, It is another material, another way of being. I was all at sea after Delu left. I spent a lot of time alone, became paranoid, suddenly feeling like everyone in the factory was looking at me, I couldn't look outside anymore, so I looked inside instead. When I'm no longer in Delu's thoughts I will be free I thought.

*Like there are on the island, there are two roads in life too, Delu said,  
Maybe they both go to the same place eventually? I asked. Maybe  
reality doesn't have coherence with your feelings*

*Death is to stay still, Delu said. You need to always be liquid  
in you life's work, Delu said.*

Today after my shift ended I removed my overalls, stripped off my underwear, decided to offer my fragile body to the accidents and care of the ocean.

I lay again on the floor beneath the enamoured rustworms, my nipples hard, the hair on my arms twitching with the dust on the factory floor, waiting to be moved.

Waiting for the singing sea.

The liquid roaring into my head.

Let it take me where it will. I don't want to leave this place.

Michael Lawton