We were all watching her that day. It’s what she liked. She liked to be the centre of attention. It was a game of cat and mouse, with us sometimes playing the cat, sometimes the mouse.

They were all watching me that day. It wasn’t what I wanted. I wanted to become invisible. But since they had nothing better to do than bait their lines for me, at times half-heartedly I made a play.

We got quite a shock when she appeared. It was just her style. Her husband is our colleague, yet she was the one who came. When she walked into the room she seemed to realise that she’d made a gaffe. It was a full half minute before she remembered to say good morning.

I didn’t realise until Steven stopped outside the house with the jetty that he’d really wanted to come after all. At least he intimated as much to the owner of the launch. And I felt foolish when I went upstairs and met a group of blank and hostile looks. I could hear them thinking “she’s done it again!” And when I came to think of it, why? I mean, why was I there? I didn’t like those people, and they didn’t like me. Then I remembered that it was because of the island. We were going down the river on the launch to an island where I knew there had been a leper colony in convict times. I badly wanted to visit that island.

While I was looking from face to face in confusion, hoping to encounter a sign of warmth, a curious byplay occurred. The newest staff member was standing apart from the others, near a window, against the soft grey background of a cloudy day, mimicking my movements. When I gave an involuntary shrug, more like a shudder, I saw him mirror it. I was so startled I forgot to greet them, then I realised they were all still watching me. For just that several seconds space I questioned my motives for being there.

We wondered what she was up to this time. What did she see in the prospect of a boat trip down the river? We tacitly decided that we’d have to keep an eye on her. Wherever she cropped up, unaccountable things happened.

It was a perfect setting for the almost imperceptible things that began to happen — an April day of atmospheric grace and quiet lucidity. The whole world was a delicate and flawless aquarelle. The clouds were very soft, voluminous as eiderdowns. The light that filtered through was soft, yet marvellously clear. The water was an indescribable translucent grey.
The journey down the river took a long time. We passed beneath the breathtaking new bridge. Above our heads, the two unfinished halves were almost touching. Steven's wife had quite a lot to say, of course, and as usual she talked about herself. Our head of department's wife cut her down to size on one occasion. It seems that Steven's wife had organised a student function, but the head's wife made it sound as if the credit went to someone else. You have to remind opinionated people of their place, and our leader's wife is very good at that.

As for Steven's lot in life, we all knew he was making a mistake when he married her. She's totally disastrous in the role. An individualist. For all the world like something out of Chekhov, gone wrong. She's one of those irritating people who's always onto something new (and not just things, we've noticed), and has to let the whole world know. At the moment I believe it's vegetarianism and Suni dancing, but who would venture to predict what next week will bring?

The journey down the river was fairly uneventful. I got the usual rap across the knuckles from Madame (professors' wives do tend to put on airs), but mostly I was contemplating the light, the way the sea and sky refracted it through one another, like mirrors faintly clouded by warm breath, so that everything shimmered with a muted pearly lustre. As we moved towards the river mouth, we saw ships waiting to come in to port, and they seemed to be moored up in the sky, floating in the air between the clouds and water. At first I was rather nervous and overexcited, trying to register the attitudes of my companions. A couple of the women seemed quite friendly. The young man who had mocked me was noncomittal, masking private irony with old Oxonian sangfroid.

Eventually I was calmed by the dreamlike gliding of the launch, and the silent interplay of light and water. But the stark, unfinished arcs of the new bridge somehow disturbed me. The chasm where they failed to meet had a quality of finality that seemed to defy geometry. I thought of hands that strained towards each other but could never touch.

We moored at the mouth of the river because the weather out on the bay was too uncertain, our skipper said, and none of us had any great desire to visit an obscure island. Mudbanks all of them, most likely, in that shark-infested bay. Anyway, most of us (all except one, in fact) had brought delicious food, and Hanse was busy passing out the wine, so we could see no reason not to stay on board and lunch at our leisure. Our professor's daughter did a spot of fishing. We all rushed towards the stern whenever she caught something, but were very disappointed that she landed nothing we could eat.

I was sitting gazing out over the stern when Rosemary started to fish. I fervently hoped she would not catch anything, but at the same
time I felt an involuntary thrill at the sight of her victims. They were small and silver and exquisite, like minute half-moons — most likely they were whiting or perch, I wasn’t sure — and there was one indignant toadfish. My little thrill of pleasure at the sight of them was instantly extinguished by a glimpse of the ugly hook piercing the delicate jaw. The young man who had mocked me was hovering around, and each time Rosemary drew another fingerling from the water, he would gently extricate the hook and let it go. Secretly I thanked him on behalf of the fish and silently I forgave him his earlier attempt at scorn. I was surprised to see him handling the fish without any hesitation. Once at a party I’d heard him express repugnance towards betrachia, and in general any kind of creature that flew or crept or crawled or moved in unpredictable ways. Perhaps the talk I’d overheard was merely for effect.

Behind me I could hear and smell the signals that meant food. I didn’t go to help the busy ladies quacking in the galley. The cabin was small, I’d brought no special food, only some apples, and anyway I felt left out of exclamations over rich viandes — roast duck, pate and the like. Still they wouldn’t let me exclude myself completely.

They enjoyed their rich repast for what seemed an eternity of lip-smacking and commentary on the qualities of the food. Through the hatch, people very kindly passed me salads, which I soon devoured. The wine was going to my head.

She managed to stay aloof from the meal, just as she’d avoided contributing to it. Was it holier than thou, some of us wondered. You know how it is with vegetarians. One of the boys had a little dig at her about it while we were having coffee, and she flew at him in no uncertain terms. Then quite artlessly he happened to mention a friend with a flock of geese that would make good eating, and asked her if she’d ever tasted roast goose. We all licked our lips at the thought and made approving noises. All except her, that is. She told him very haughtily that she’d had roast goose for Christmas, every Christmas, as a child, but that she now knew better. She told us that she now believed, along with the ancient Japanese, that a white goose was a symbol of the soul, and then she confused us utterly with some Hindu-sounding mumbo-jumbo about the next incarnation. Perhaps, she speculated with her characteristic effrontery, we (herself excluded presumably) would come back as geese, at the mercy of somebody like our colleague. Trust her to leave a nasty taste in everybody’s mouth!

The meal was finally over. The other women went into a gaggle of activity over soggy tea-towels. The launch seemed very small. It was impossible to isolate oneself. I wondered why the name of the launch was “Mistress”. I could feel eyes trained on me at times through the
portholes of the cabin, and there was always somebody else on deck, a few feet away. The wife of the man whose friend kept geese struck up a conversation, and I started to tell her about skydiving, a pastime which has started to interest me, but the hostess’s voice suddenly cut in via the galley-hatch, sounding as acid as her words. “You should have done all that when you were young!”

We avoided the leper colony.

On the way back we noticed the professor saying something to her, but the only person near enough to catch it was Klinghoffer’s wife. Intriguing. You could see Madame was not amused.

The weather was uncertain, so we couldn’t moor near the leper colony. On the way back, glistening filaments of rain moved in the air like a spinnaker, or the sheerest of parachutes billowing over the bay. The flimsy strands became heavier, denser, opaque as muslin, gathering towards the launch like curtains around an old four-poster bed, rocking imperceptibly with the transitions of dreams. I love the interplay of sea and rain. Water is the element of melancholy.

Adrift in my own reverie and nebulous sensations, I was startled when a voice reverberated in my ear. The voice was saying something about poverty . . . Manila . . . I couldn’t think of anything to say. I’m not familiar with that kind of poverty. I don’t think the professor is, either.

We noticed young McCaffrey hovering around her too. Someone ought to warn him. But we kept an eye on things that day. He was quite safe with us there. Once he leaned towards her and said something, and she looked surprised, then wistful. Klinghoffer’s wife will no doubt have the story.

We were drifting deeper into grey, where the only colours were the scattered mooring lights. McCaffrey, who’d been sitting opposite, studying me, leaned forward. “You look like the little mermaid in Copenhagen.” He could not have known how mermaids fascinate me. I tried to shrug it off. “Sans graffiti?” Secretly I wondered if even a mermaid stood much chance with avid fishermen like these about. (A hook through the jaw? Yes, madam, we can do that for you. If you’d just like to swim this way please . . . )

When we disembarked, she got into a car with the Klinghoffers and young McCaffrey. She’s quick off the mark, you have to grant her that. It had been a most pleasant launch trip up and down the river, and the luncheon was perfectly delightful.

I was offered a lift home with the Klinghoffers. McCaffrey accepted a lift with them too. We climbed into the back of their enormous limousine. The atmosphere was strangely intimate, though we were
separated by several feet of leather seat. There was nothing we could do
or say.

I long for journeys that seem not to end, with magic in the texture of
the glass against the rain, casting patterned shadows like a coarse-
grained veil on faces moving swiftly under street lamps, congealing into
scatterings of brilliants, and pausing in its coursings inexplicably, inar-
ticulate and blind as tears.

TERRY HARRINGTON

ARRIVAL

Waiting for them was like watching a tide.
I knew they were coming but didn’t notice
the inches & yards stepped towards me.
Suddenly I am swamped, carried out
onto the doorstep as they ruffle up dog ears
& maul the bell. I wish I could kiss them
but they are the wrong breed — all teeth
& the clink of spectacles, & handkerchiefs.

They shed their bags & coats, lap up coffee
& whimper about provincialities.
I love each one of them despite
the dribble that hangs from their mouths;
the way they grab the deepest cushions
to ease out the knots in their legs.
Yes, the tide has ebbed & now recedes;
I comb their arrival for shells amongst weed.