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**Sea Anemones**  
by Bruce Holland Rogers

In a little church by the sea, long after the old gods had begun to sleep, there was a preacher of the Christian gospel who earnestly worried for the souls of his congregants. He wanted every one of them to one day arrive safe in the Father God's heaven, so he harangued and exhorted them about all the temptations that might lead them astray. He was particularly worried about the sorts of love and lust that Father God had condemned.

He had a strong voice and chose his words well. His predecessor, though no less earnest, had been a stoop-shouldered, colorless little man. For listeners in the last pews, this previous preacher's drone from the pulpit was sometimes lost in the sound of waves crashing against the rocky shore. Old people dozed. So did some who were not so old.

This current preacher, though, belted out his verses and his warnings loud enough to wake *any* sleeper. "Men," he cried, "can you *imagine* lying with another man, receiving him as you would have your wives receive you? Women, can you *imagine* kissing and embracing another woman as you would your husband?" There were other kinds of love prohibited by the Father God, but the preacher often dwelt on these particular sins, his voice thick with a disgust that his listeners could not help but feel themselves. No, they could not, dared not imagine the sort of passion that the Father God had prohibited. "Unnatural acts. Ungodly, and unnatural acts!"

These words, carried on a thunderous voice, vibrated in the ear of Cupid, who woke from that slumber that the old gods had been sleeping these many centuries. The son of Venus felt provoked by what he heard.

As Apollo learned long ago, it is dangerous to provoke

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Cupid. The sun god, boasting about the sky python he had killed with an arrow, said that it was the shoulder that made the archer. He compared his massive arms to Cupid's and concluded that while Cupid might carry a bow, it was but a toy compared to the charioteer's. Cupid replied that a hunter is known by his prey, and that if he felled Apollo, didn't that make him the greater archer? He sent a golden arrow into Apollo's heart and a leaden one into the daughter of Peneus. Apollo could think of nothing else but this girl who suddenly despised all thoughts of men or marriage, and he never did win her.

Not only slander, but subtler things might provoke Cupid. He felt irked by his mother's constant demands. "Shoot Neptune, my son! Let's rouse the cool sea god to feverish passion. Oh, there's Ceres, trying to keep her tasty daughter a virgin forever. Put an arrow into Pluto, my boy, and show that even Mister Gloom can't resist us." She picked mortal targets for him, too, as if she forgot whose arrows these were. So one day when she embraced him fondly, as a mother will do, he let a golden arrow graze her breast. A mere scratch, he gave her. She did not even notice the injury, but she did notice the mortal Adonis, a hunter. They made an unlikely pair, for Venus thought that traipsing through the woods and stabbing animals was the sort of work best left to servants or cold-hearted Diana, who never cared how she looked before men, anyway, with her troupe of girls who admired the huntress for her skill and wit more than her beauty. But Venus! She would never have imagined herself doing anything of the sort.

That was a sight, then, the goddess of love in her filmy gowns getting twigs in her hair and dirt on her sandaled feet, following Adonis from one bloody scene to another.

So Cupid went to this church by the sea, offended. He would shoot where he pleased, and how dare any mortal express such disgust at some of the results? He sat in the rafters,

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rubbing centuries of sleep from his eyes, and listened. When the preacher said again, “Just *imagine...*,” Cupid smiled.

His arrows never were his only weapon, merely the most selective. Cupid’s quiver also held stoppered bottles, and one of these he uncorked to pour a golden mist over the congregation. For the first time, in all the times the preacher had said, “Just *imagine*,” they could. “Just *imagine*, men, accepting another man as your lover.” And the men imagined their hearts full of longing for another man. “Women, just *imagine* that you would have another woman standing in the place where God has given you your husbands.” And the women imagined their lips burning for another woman’s kiss.

As the mist was not selective, neither was its effect. The men felt the lure of no particular man; the women lusted for no particular woman. The embraces they imagined were general, universal, and joyous. Even the preacher felt the effect of the mist, though it reached him last. He paused, thinking a pleasant thought about his hand closing tenderly around...

But, no, he would fight this thought. This was wrong, and he would summon the will to be disgusted, though there was a fire in his blood now. The congregation sat stiff, in more ways than one, not daring to move, willing themselves to stop thinking what they could not cease to think.

These were pious people. They had been schooled all their lives to revile the sin of indiscriminate love. Their mortal souls were at stake.

Cupid didn’t care. He poured it on, unstopping another vial of his funky mist, and then another. What the congregation began to feel was beyond sin, as everything in that spare sanctuary seemed to undulate and wink and promise. The wood grain of the pulpit swirled and twined with breathtaking beauty. The virginal white walls seemed made for caressing. The hard pews pressed so lovingly against back and buttocks that one woman



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groaned aloud with pleasure.

With that groan went the last of their resistance, except for one tiny gasp from the preacher and his one word, “No.” Then they were all gazing in rapture at the room around them, at each other. They tasted the perfume of ordinary air, wanted to embrace the earth itself. They felt the tender embrace of their clothes for the first time, the erotic whisper of cloth against their skin.

They might have fallen upon one another, men on women on women on men on men, but the desire they felt was not merely for each other, but for everything. A breath coming in was a lover arriving. A breath going out was a lover’s momentary, aching departure.

They spilled out of the church, wanting the rough or smooth bark of the trees, the bright love song of birds, the embrace of grass and sky and sand. They wanted everything all at once, and could not choose among their many lovers until someone, it may even have been the preacher himself, said, “The sea!”

The sea was a lover that would embrace each body everywhere at once. The sea was a lover vast enough to receive them. They ran, hearts pounding with lust and joy. Across the tide pools they ran, scattering seagulls that they loved, glimpsing starfish that they loved, thinking tenderly of the limpet’s embrace of the thoroughly embraceable rocks, but not pausing for any of these. They ran, feet splashing into the sea.

Some fell and cut their hands and knees on the jagged barnacles that they loved. They got up. They kept going, wading out to let the sea embrace their knees, to soak through their clothes to their loins, to accept them up to their chests, their shoulders, their ears. They tasted the salt of this lover who could be, for a moment at least, all lovers. Their mouths filled with the sea’s kisses.

Cupid would have let them drown.

Their splashing and tasting, the thrusting of their hips in the water, their answering undulations to the waves...all of this roused Neptune. Is it any wonder? Who would not be roused from sleep by that?

The sea god looked into their hearts and saw what they wanted. He touched them with his weedy fingers, and their feet held firm to the sea floor. They shrank beneath the waves, softening, yielding, their mouths puckering for a kiss. With another touch, Neptune removed from them any memory of what they had been before, male or female, and made each a bit of both.

They are there to this day, clinging to the bottom of the sea, loving the water, loving the rocks beneath them, loving the fish that they hug with their tentacles in an embrace that ends with digestion, for they kept the aching effects of Cupid's spell. No one but the archer himself can undo that.

Desire is always with them. It overcomes them on nights of the full moon when the water grows cloudy with their sperm and starry with their eggs.

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