

## **Drowned**

*Alysha Herrmann*

### 1. Battle Lines

Soraya is five and furious.  
Saltwater eats history here, and  
Soraya is smaller than small.  
So small that her body could disappear,  
flesh made foam and gritty residue.

Left alone on the beach,  
Inda and Kurn laughing ahead,  
with each other's hands held.  
Teeth coated with sand when they smile,  
pearls waiting to be born.

Inda and Kurn are only just bigger and older,  
and Soraya lives for their pearls to be worn again.  
They walk ahead without her.  
Soraya kicks the beach.  
Kicks history.

### 2. A Mother Calls

Unravelling in her mother's voice, calling from across the dunes, 'it's time, dinner will be waiting for us.' The blood comes and gathers first in Soraya's fifteen-year-old eyes, gathers too in her hands and her hips and her lips and her thighs; birth magic calling the seas.

The whale beaches itself at the exact spot. Kicking history.

### 3. Lovers Lie

Inda and Kurn are grown now too.  
Tall and perfect and finally towards Soraya.  
Their teeth white in the breathing night.  
Kurn wants to climb the whale.  
But Soraya says — no — with bite between the words.  
Kurn does not climb the whale.  
Inda draws a whale in the sand,  
with the light of her teeth to see by.  
Soraya misses her mother, and the whale mocks her memory.  
The whale does not breathe either.  
Like Soraya's mother it disappears with the days.

### 4. A Woman Without Calendars

If calendars still made themselves known on the beach in Pinnaroo, time would be hovering one hundred and fifty years from now. Over this inland sea made by old men's tyranny. Instead, Soraya becomes a woman without calendars. A woman with too many questions. She sneaks back to the whale long after the pickers and the cleaners and the curious abandon it. White bones a hollow wind-chime to whisper through, to sink down inside and sit. She does. Sit.

The sea spread before her. Thick black butter seeping and dripping under a sky made of clouds. They hang darker than red womb's blood, ready to pour and thrash. Soraya's belly aches. The sky aches with her. And the sea too. And the whale's ghost sings. The merfolk always answer the songs of ghosts. Full throats and tails made of star signs. Tonight is no different. Khatrin is her name, when Soraya asks. She does. Ask.

## 5. Pearly Whites

She tries to tell them — Inda and Kurn — in the morning.  
Sun-flecked and day-drenched, they laugh.  
The beginning of a new history's path.  
Soraya still feels the snapping in her fingertips.  
The tips of fingers that touched a merfolk.  
A mermaid. A merwoman.  
More woman than they three will ever be.  
Soraya spins away from two.

## 6. Mother Part One

Soraya's mother died three summers before the blood came and the whale too.  
She died sticky and hungry and hollow.  
She died like so many do,  
Alone.

## 7. Queen of the Castle

'You have to choose!'  
Inda and Kurn on opposite sides.  
Soraya is eight and pulled by their tides.  
  
Me or him. She or me.  
Soraya runs to her mother.  
Tear stained and sand baked.  
  
Soraya takes her mother's advice.  
She builds a sandcastle,  
alone. Inda and Kurn watch.

## 8. Meeting in the Middle

Soraya seeks the merwoman each night.

She finds her.

Soraya begs Inda and Kurn each day to believe.

They do not.

Soraya drifts further from the daylight.

Disappearing.

Khattrin weaves lightning into Soraya's mouth.

Both breathing.

The whale's ghost watches with wide eyes.

Scandalised.

## 9. Mother Part Two

A handprint stained with love covers Soraya's twelve-year-old face.

It stings and sings and whispers and Soraya hides until it fades.

Pa finds her beneath the star-stained sky, shivering and cold.

Tells her to come in now and hands over the grief he holds.

The grief never gets smaller, only swells with the seasons.

The echo of her handprint itching beneath Soraya's eyes.

Pa sees. He grieves too. But never speaks. An old man with old ways.

Nothing to offer a woman becoming herself into the future.

We keep those mistakes. Plastered in our blood. The echo.

Blood echoes of them and us, of she and him and they.

Soraya softening and ripening and lengthening and lingering.  
Time chasing its tail and devouring her fears. She smiles again.

#### 10. Choosing

‘You have to choose!  
Dreams or life. Us or lies.’  
Inda and Kurn on the same side.  
Soraya standing opposite.

‘You can choose.  
Fins beneath the waves.  
I can make it so.  
As you wish.’

#### 11. Unheard-of Songs

The merfolk know every secret angle of a woman’s heart. They collect secrets and stories like seagrass and turtle flesh. Ready to fill bellies on a dark night. They collect lovers too. Like treasured abalone. They swallow and taste. They lick their lips and their teeth are sharp. Their hearts sharper.

#### 12. She Makes Trouble

The whole town turns out to search for her.  
An orphaned daughter swallowed in darkness.

They will never find her. Soraya swims now.  
Hair tangled in history. Teeth sharp.

**Alysha Herrmann** lives, loves and makes from regional South Australia. She is an independent creative producer, writer, performance-maker and community organiser, and is the co-founder of *Part of Things*. Alysha makes performances, installations, experiences, presentations, poetry, digital exchanges and small moments of connection in all kinds of strange places.