

SYMBIOSIS

I

Manta cleaning station

A hundred metres out in the blue
where the current warms
and a single large coral bommie
strides the seabed

you will find them,
lined up like cars at a carwash
their gliding wings stilled
mouths passively slack.

They wait their turn for the cleaning ritual
covered by clouds of cleaner-fish,
blue-streak wrasse, clarion angelfish,
scarlet shrimp

pick debris from the gills,
swim inside opened mouths
to trawl small parasites
from the gill rakers,

pluck dead skin from the outer body
and sterilise wounds
in a crackling, buzzing, grunting
symphony of symbiosis.

The cleaner-fish dart away, fed,
the manta depart, laundered and healthy,
large frames rejuvenated
as they dance through the waves.

II

Octopus mating

As you swim in the deep ocean,
gentle hum of water swirling round,
out of nowhere a rock comes to life,
a kaleidoscope of colours
reveals the magical octopod.

Minutes before all you saw
was a grey knobbly rock
or a tinge of brown in the back of a cave,
as a sprinkle of snapper pass by
you may have seen the rapid change to ink-jet black.

Now the octopus is seeking his mate
arrayed in all his finery,
a rapid dance,
injection of spermatophores
into the waiting pouch
and it is done.

This is a death act for the male,
while the female guards her eggs,
cleans them, fans them with her syphon,
removing toxic bacteria.

She does not leave her cave
to hunt or eat
and when the eggs begin to hatch
her starving body breathes its last.

III

Coral partners

Coral gleams in shining colours
green, orange, red
from algae encased within their polyps,
a mutual partnership.

The algae spin sunlight into energy,
feeding the marine colonies,
while the coral bestows shelter
from deep inside its core.

When the coral bleach
from stress and temperature warming,
they eject their partner algae,
an act of self-destruction.

We are all bleaching
in this world of unmindful living
so bent on our misguided paths
that we don't even know it.

Chantal Juanita Stewart