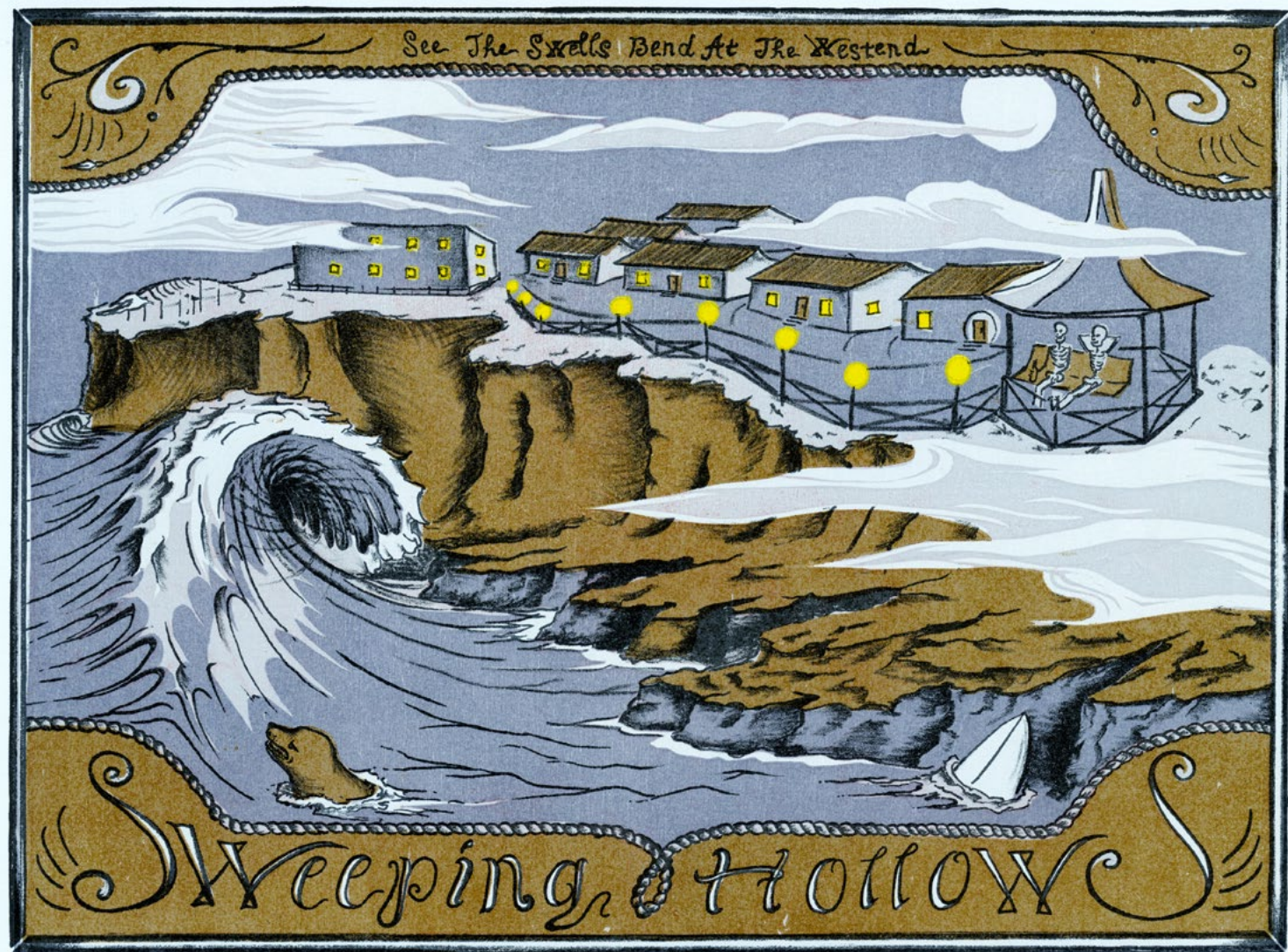


LUCAS ELMER

Sweeping Hollows, 2012
Woodcut/Lithograph, 14 x 11 in



Sweeping Hollows

LUCAS ELMER '12

COURTESY THE ARTIST

RICHARD HUFFMAN

The Inner Dark

Annie saw the baby roll up the tidal sandbank with each new wave. At first she thought it was a small seal. She approached it carefully and watched it roll back and forth a few times before she waded in after a wave receded. It wore a wet suit, which was a surprise to Annie. She never imagined wet suits were made that small.

She waited for Adeena to say something, or even Fierce, though it was still early in the morning and he seldom showed up until later in the day. But one never knew. He could be unpredictable, and if he did start yammering this early it was always about something prickly. He seldom had anything to say that wasn't a complaint. Though Annie had to hand it to him. The advice about her meds was spot on. "Do you want to just go on and on and on feeling like this slug, like somebody just bashed your head in with a hammer and you act like one of those zombies on TV? Really? Is that what you want?"

Of course Adeena would not agree to this, but then where was she whenever Annie did take the meds? At least Fierce was always there, meds or not. But Annie loved Adeena so much. She *never* complained . . . about anything. Her heart was pure. She had delicate wings that sparkled in the sunlight, glinting gold and lavender, vibrating faster than a hummingbird's. Sometimes there was confusion about Adeena and hummingbirds. They were alike in so many ways.

Annie carried the baby back into the fern grotto that opened to a cave where she had stayed the last two nights. The rainy season had not yet started and the winter waves that would inundate the grotto were still a month or so off. It was a cozy place. Once, years and years and years before, she had brought classes of children here and told them tales of bootleggers using the grotto to store barrels of whiskey. Then she would tell them to look at the cliffs around the beach that led to the grotto where swallows built their nests and on the other cliff where cormorants stood on tiny ledges hour after hour, staring at the cliffside.

Sometimes she would tell one of the boys—it was always the boys—to stay back from the waves. There was a riptide there and it would only take one slip. Most listened. Only two did not. They were best friends.

"You don't have to bring that up," Annie said. She should have known. Fierce was such a downer when he

showed up sudden-like. “I’m going to do CPR,” she said and put her mouth on the baby’s mouth. She felt its little chest fill up with her breath. Still it did not breathe on its own. She turned it over and unzipped the back of the wet suit and pulled it down and patted the baby’s back with the palm of her hand. Water trickled out of its mouth.

“C’mon . . . you can do it,” she said and breathed into it again and again, each time the chest rising, then collapsing back. Annie turned it over and pushed against its back. More water came out. It was clear except for small frothy bubbles.

“CPR,” she said when Adeena asked what she was doing. “I wondered where you were,” Annie said. “This baby just rolled up out of the water.”

Annie could tell Adeena was very nervous about what was going on. Adeena didn’t like being in jail, even for a night, and she didn’t want any more trouble from parents and park rangers and people who didn’t even know Annie.

“It’s okay,” Annie assured Adeena. “I was trained in CPR. Don’t look so worried. Look . . . I think it’s breathing a little now.”

Fierce wasn’t so sure and said as much.

“I think you’re only happy when I do something bad,” Annie said. “Why don’t you just leave me alone?”

Fierce shrugged and went back into the interior of the grotto where it was dark and old logs lay scattered on the sand and water dripped from the ceiling where the ferns grew. Still, Annie knew he was there, waiting for things to go bad.

Adeena was very nervous. It was her one fault, Annie thought. Sometimes Adeena just could not bask in her own light. She let shadows interfere, like an unexpected solar eclipse. “You know I love you,” Adeena said, “but are you sure about this? Maybe it isn’t a real human baby. Maybe it’s just a doll someone dressed in that wet suit and it fell off a boat and the little girl who owned the doll is sad but she is okay on the boat with her father and mother, so no one is worried too much.”

Annie shook her head. Sometimes she didn’t know about Adeena. Anyone could see it was a real baby with soft skin that was just a little blue and lips that were too purple from not having breathed right while she was in the water. But babies were good at that when they were cold. “They go into this kind of hibernation,” she explained. “They get

cold and their breathing slows so much you think they’re dead but they’re just waiting for someone to wake them up.”

There was a loud, sarcastic laugh from the back of the grotto. “And maybe you just need to go back on your meds!”

“I’m going to ask you to leave,” Annie said to Fierce.

“All right, all right. I won’t say anything, but . . . well . . . never mind. It’s your funeral.”

After a while the baby began taking little gaspy breaths. “See,” Annie said, wagging her finger at Fierce, or where she thought he was, in the back of the grotto. “You don’t always know, Fierce,” she said.

There was no answer. Of course not. He was like that when he was wrong, but then Adeena had gone too, which surprised Annie. “It’s just you and me,” she said to the baby and picked it up and held it against her chest and watched its eyes close when she tilted it back. “You must be very tired.” She wrapped her coat around the baby, letting it snuggle against her. There were little baby snores coming from it. Annie laid down on the tarp she had spread over the damp sand just inside the grotto’s entrance. She looked up at the green ferns growing from the roof of the grotto and watched waterdrops form on the tips of the ferns and slowly fall, and she listened to the whoosh of the waves coming into the beach and falling back again. She closed her eyes and slept.

* * *

“Hey!”

“Hello . . . wake up.”

Annie tried to pretend she didn’t hear them.

“C’mon, lady, you can’t camp here. It’s a state park!”

“Don, take it easy.”

“Well then you get her up. I’m tired of dealing with these people.”

“Miss . . .”

A softer voice. Someone nicer. A woman who would understand. Annie opened her eyes. The one park ranger was squatting and smiled when Annie opened her eyes. The other one was standing, shaking his head, his hands on his hips.

“I’m sorry but you can’t stay here. We’ll help you load your stuff into the truck and take you into town. You know where the homeless shelter is?”

“Yes,” Annie said. She pulled her coat tighter around

the baby. She hoped it didn’t start crying. They would take it from her. They always took things from her. She felt afraid. “Adeena?” she said. Where was she? She needed her.

“No. I’m not Adeena. I’m Marie. Is there someone else with you?”

Annie shook her head. The fear was beginning. Fierce . . . Fierce, leave me alone.

“She’s hiding something under her coat,” the one standing said. “Probably something stolen.”

“Like what? Seashells?”

“We should search her.”

The woman ranger put her hand out and touched Annie on her elbow where the coat had slid up her arm. “Don’t worry. We aren’t going to search you.”

“I don’t have the baby,” Annie blurted.

“What?”

The one standing came in closer. He bent over and looked hard at Annie’s face. “Hey . . . I know you.”

“Told you,” Fierce said, laughing.

“She’s that college kid . . . a volunteer . . . who took a class of thirty-five third graders here without any of the regular docents. Two years ago. She let two kids drown.” He shook his head in disgust. “They should have locked her crazy ass up.”

Marie ignored him and smiled at Annie. “Listen . . . it’s all okay. We’re here to help you. But I need to know about this baby. Do you have a real baby under your coat? You don’t have to hide it if you do. It probably needs to eat, don’t you think?”

Annie thought about it, that the baby needed to eat.

“They’re going to lock you up for sure this time,” Fierce said. He was so smug about it. Happy almost, but yet not.

“It’s okay,” the woman ranger, Marie, said.

Her partner shook his head in disgust. He was like Fierce.

“I think it’s okay too,” Adeena said. “I can see her essence. It is filled with light. A good golden light.”

Fierce laughed so loud that the grotto shook like an earthquake rolling through.

Annie saw the woman’s hand reach out and finger the edge of Annie’s coat and slowly peel it away. Annie’s eyes went wide. “I’m afraid,” she said.

“It will be all right. I promise not to hurt you,” Marie

said as she opened one side of Annie’s coat. And what it was that Annie saved, and held so dear, tumbled out and into the woman’s hands.

Annie saw then the sadness in the other’s eyes and knew it was her own sadness reflected back and saw even Fierce, in all his darkness, bow his gnarled head and slowly dissolve away, leaving only an inky vapor behind, and that too faded on the salty breezes that swept through the cave.

Richard Huffman completed his undergraduate work at Eastern Washington University. His graduate studies in Sociology and Creative writing were completed at San Jose State University. His short stories have been published in *Catamaran*, *The Reed*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Santa Cruz, and has completed a gritty Western Novel. He is currently working on a novel about love and race relations in and after the Vietnam war.