Primordial Language

by Tyellas

Summary

The events on a Baltimore dock lead to a Chesapeake cove, to quiet and nature, and a chance to choose.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

“Those that know, speak the primordial language – the language we spoke in paradise: the language of the birds…” Guillermo del Toro, notebook page in The Shape of Water: Creating a Fairy Tale for Troubled Times

Elisa’s conscious. Waking up is her least favorite time of the day. Especially when she’s having such a delightful dream, one where she is under dusky water, in the creature’s arms. Clinging to the heaven of it, Elisa nestles against his scales and muscles. The creature clenches her in response. She vents a silent sigh that fills her mouth with cool liquid. Finally, she resigns herself to opening her eyes.

The dream is real.

Elisa seizes up in panic. It can’t be. Her throat's full of water. She’ll drown! She thrashes, desperately, tangled in the fabric of her dress, until she is seized. She is grateful when some force rockets her up, where all her instincts send her. Surfacing, she gasps, flails out on the surface of the
water, finds safety.

For the creature is with her, supporting her.

Again, they cling. He courses them both along the surface, ducking his own head periodically. A gull’s cry pierces the air. How far out to sea are they? Elisa catches a haze of shoreline and jerks towards it. He turns them, smoothly.

Soon enough, something bumps her feet. Elisa twists to stand on the softness below. This doesn't go well. She staggers, one foot bare, one still shod. The creature, wiser, swims by her still, circling around her with encouraging yawps. He is herding her to the shore. Eventually he stands, sweeps her up. It's quicker for him to carry her through the shallows, over a pebbled high-water line, to dry land.

Elisa is still shaking when he places her on shaggy, sandy grass. She wipes her wet hair back and opens her mouth by reflex. All she can think of to sign is: *What??*

The creature, in response, seems delighted. He strokes her as he did when they first came together, flashing blue, petting her throat, her hair. He squats by Elisa until her breathing has calmed. He, himself, peers around, taking in every breath of wind and night sound. His hunched form blends into the world of blue and darkest gray around them. When Elisa seems collected, he changes his touches to pat her in place with a downward press, keeping her sitting.

The creature is not settling. Abruptly, he rises from his squat, turns and goes back into the water. Elisa reels to standing. He pushes a hand down, like when he'd petted her in place. Then he signs two things, visible against the pale blaze of his chest. They are the sign for *APART*, not-together, and *EGG*.

Elisa is so shocked all she can do is register his strength and smoothness as he strides the shallows. In a moment, he's submerged, arrowing away.

New terror takes Elisa. She doesn’t know if she should go after him or not. Finally, she *thinks*. Is this how the creature had felt every time she'd left him behind in the lab? In her apartment? She wipes her face with her hand, and looks around.

She cannot see where the creature has gone. But she can see, for it seems to be the earliest dawn. The water before her is wide and still, only the smallest wavelets lapping her shore. She’s on a sandy spar between a water flow with some depth, river or estuary, and a widening bay. The spar is alive with scrub plants. A few scruffy trees are linked by a tangle of grasses, wild rose brambles, and bittersweet vines. There’s also an old wooden dinghy, half-fallen apart. She can sit on the little bench in its bow. When she does, she registers a yellow sign on the tallest tree: NO HUNTING. Across the estuary cove, there’s a cluster of small houses, white against the dimness, the only buildings in sight.

Something swirls through the sky overhead. It’s a flock of birds, spiraling south, low enough that she hears a dawn chorus of song.

Their passage startles another, closer bird. A chickadee whistles from the tree with the sign, the simplest two-note call. Elisa automatically whistles back. It replies. She feels herself smile. Now, she knows she really is alive, however strange it is.

Elisa finally exhales. Whatever happens next, she’s got to get out of these wet things. She should be freezing, but it's curiously temperate. Her waterlogged sweater and tattered stockings are beyond saving. Her red shoe is as alone as she is. Still, she takes off her dress with care. The charcoal silk had been her nicest outfit. She couldn’t wear anything less to say goodbye to the creature.
As she removes it, her finger catches in a hole. There’s one in the front, and the back, too, on the left side of the bodice. Elisa presses her own chest, carefully. No holes there. She wrings out the dress and drapes it over the light twigs of the bittersweet shrubs, then…

Remembers, in a tidal flood. She’d been standing on the docks, failing at matching Giles’ gracious goodbye. Her heart had been shattering as she told the creature they had to part. Pouring rain had blended with her blinding tears. With her silent screams and Strickland’s bullets. She’d felt her hot blood on her ribs, followed by pain that drained her away.

What Elisa recalled next, it felt like she’d seen it from above. Giles and Zelda holding hands above a slumped dark body; Strickland, in a welter of his own blood. Her friends were all right. Strickland wasn’t. She’d liked that. But where, oh where, had the creature gone?

The moment she’d wondered, she was back with the creature, in that underwater heaven like her dreams, feeling his kiss. She’d gasped one suffocating instant, as if she was finishing dying. Then everything was…fine. Together, they’d tightened their embrace. She’d stripped off her coat so she could hold him closer, buried her face in his shoulder, against the glimmer of his skin’s lights. The last thing she recalls was that there had been the kick of his feet, a sense of flow, one arm peeling off from their embrace to swim them away…

Now she is here.

Somewhere on the edge of the Chesapeake. Curled up on a broken dinghy’s bench in her underthings, holding one shoe, shattered with renewed misery.

It’s her fault he’s gone. Whenever she’d told the creature no, or backed off, he’d paid attention, as if she’d laid down a law of nature. She’d told the creature she couldn’t go with him, signed that they had to be apart. And now, after saving her life, somehow, he had left before she could take it back. How can she find him? When she does, how can she tell him it’s worth the life he gave back to her, to find a way?

Before her tears can fall, another natural sound comes to her ears. The soft plash of a swimmer, surfacing.

The creature has returned. He’s walking back up the shallows, back to her, stronger and more beautiful than ever. The ripples of his passage catch the faint light, drawing silver chevrons on dark water. Another dawn flock of birds heading south wings over him, dipping low and calling, like they salute him. Elisa springs up. She chucks away her shoe and dashes to meet him, her heart in her throat. They come together right where the little waves kiss the pebbly shore.

This time, the creature doesn’t embrace her. His hands are full. He’s carrying a branch of red maple leaves and, in one hand’s webs, a great scoopful of oysters. He lays it all at Elisa’s feet and, gazing up at her, signs over them: **EGG.**

Elisa sinks down beside him, toes in the foam, and flings her arms around him. Now, she’s crying. All that misery because he’d wanted to bring her presents. She smiles through her tears and takes her hands back to lift the branch. **Beautiful,** she signs, holding the leaves against her for an instant, like a dancer’s fan. He tilts his head, very interested. Then he offers her an oyster. She accepts it, mouthing a kiss at him, and looks around for a stick.

After a moment of watching Elisa fail to pry an oyster open, the creature takes over. He flicks them open with his claws, effortlessly, laying them out for her. She sits down properly beside him, both of them with their legs extended, ankles in the waves. The oysters are lined up between them. She picks one up, a pearly oval of flesh in its shell. Oysters like this were expensive, a treat for starlets in swank
hotels. She’d never had them fresh. But Giles had delivered one of his wittier monologues about them: she recalls, wryly, that they’re the opposite of cornflakes. So she’s got an idea what to do.

She pokes and slides one out of its shell, into her mouth, for one firm bite. Her eyes widen with pleasure. No wonder they’re a delicacy. It tastes, frankly, like sex with the creature. Suddenly ravenous, she works her way through them. When she offers the creature one, then another, he accepts. It’s a little bit of normality that makes her smile.

It doesn’t last long. As she eats, swallowing feels…different. When she downs the last oyster, she touches her neck. Part of it flutters. She explores, tensing with amazement at what her fingers find.

Gills, like his.

They’re why she’s alive. Why being underwater with him was more than a dream.

Elisa’s eyes blur anew. It’s all unbelievable, suddenly. What he’s done for her. What happened on the docks. That it’s all over. With a breathy gasp, hand still on her throat, she turns to him. She flings herself on him, more roughly than she’s dared before, to hold him tight, tight, tight.

Her reward – that’s what it feels like – is his cool arms around her, his deep growl as he presses his mouth to hers. He’s so strong, now, as if the briny water has filled him out to what he should be. Suddenly, his breath hitches. His grip softens, lightens into his webbed hands skimming her. There’s been so much going on she’s forgotten she’s near naked, in only her best underwear, ink-blue lace.

An urge beyond words grips Elisa. Unsettled body and rattled soul, she aches for him to take her. She removes her lace bra. It’s all right, she thinks to herself, with hysterical humor. He’s bought her dinner, taken her back to his place, saved her life…

To show the creature what she needs, Elisa reaches for his lifted hand. Trembling with hungry tenderness, she kisses him there, each bony, teal-marked knuckle. The skim of slime over him does indeed echo the oysters, briny-sweet, tempting to her as everything about him. Very carefully, she takes the tip of one fatal finger inside her lips. She draws her mouth along it, releasing before his claw can nick her lip. This last brings out his blue phosphorescence and his startled-aroused noise, that deep breath on the edge of a moan.

Elisa kneels up and wriggles out of her waist-high panties, tossing them upshore to join her bra. It strikes her, with more overwrought joy, that they have room, now. This whole dark cove can be their bed. The whole sea. It’s the most natural thing in the world for him to reach for her, for her to straddle him where he sits, his legs and her feet lapped by the waves. Elisa leans down, kisses his shoulders, glimpsing his illumination following her touch.

She feels the water higher around her legs. The fine sand softens, foam pooling around her knees as she settles into him. She shifts her body, glimpses herself pale as the waves’ foam. His dark, elegant outline leans back against sizzle and sand. He’s so sleek and cool, a living extension of the water beneath her, compared to the blood pounding hot through her torso. Her excited quim brushes above his crotch, where subtle fins blend seamlessly into his stomach plates, hiding the rising curve of his arousal.

Not for long. They both exhale in satisfaction as his erection slides free. Elisa indulges, reaching down to spread her labia and slide herself, there, against his shaft, twice as slippery as the rest of him. The creature seizes her hips with an echoing cry, arcing up to her. Again, she remembers: how so much of her world would find this wrong. Here and now, she doesn’t have any sauce or defiance left. There is nothing but how right it is, how much she loves and needs him. She mounts him.
They are wild together. Elisa rides him like it’s their first time, flushed and shaking. Rides him like a mermaid sliding on a sea serpent, his cock’s ample fluids sealing them together against the splashing water. His lights go nearly dark when he’s inside her, his noises hoarse and helpless. She lets herself gasp, too, breathing as hard as she wants. His contours spread and fill her. She leans onto him more, tilting so her clit gets caught up in the luscious friction, too. She’s on the edge of a climax, tense and hot, when it happens. With a released moan, he seals a hand against her back, flips her, and they roll. Into the water!

He’s turned them right into a spot waves have carved into slight depth, maybe two feet. She’s submerged for an instant; he scoops her up and clasps her. They’re still connected. Face above her, he draws in a mighty breath of water and swells, muscles cording fuller, the shaft inside her widening.

She’s below the water, too, holding her breath. The tension of that goes down her spine, electric, giddy. She comes, shatteringly sweet, pulsing, like she did underwater in her submerged bathroom. And that’s when her gills open.

Elisa gasps, mouth filling a second time with water. New sensations flicker: seals inside her skull, channels in her throat, welcoming the water, an influx of sweet coolness. It feels...good! The shift in breathing makes her head light. Then, he thrusts into her. She feels how strong he is now, hears his cry of pleasure through the water, and gives over to her own instincts.

He bears her down against the sand-floor, thrusting, swept away. When Elisa’s shoulders brush the sand, she digs in with a wriggle, remembers to throat-breathe, and arcs up into him. The slime and fluids that drip off him on land join them together here. They both feel more friction. The salt-touched water gives Elisa a touch of buoyancy. It’s easy to wrap her legs up and around him, a dream made real. A sudden flurry of bubbles tickles Elisa’s face. Her eyes open to the teal-and-silver churn around her, water and foam and his magnificent shadowed self, flaring with a burst of blue as he shudders in climax. She wraps her arms about him as much as she can, sheltering his pleasure.

When he returns her embrace, he rolls her up and over again. They are returned to the halfway-zone where they began, between land and sea.

When Elisa’s heart stops beating enough for her to think, she hears the chickadee. The bird is chipping notes at them like a scandalized neighbor for mating out of season. She levers up to see if she can’t catch its white blaze of feathers hopping around its tree.

When Elisa sits up, the creature does, too, with a noise of distress. She turns to him with concern. Before she can sign anything, he strokes her ribs, her hips. She looks down at herself. There are dark lines of blood. It’s not bullet holes, this time. With his new strength, the creature has nicked and scratched her where he held her. Elisa beams forgivingly, to show she doesn’t mind. Nonetheless, he runs a hand over the marks, smoothing his slime into her. The scratches vanish like he wiped them away.

Elisa signs thank you and tilts her head towards the broken dinghy. She still has the urge to collect herself on land. On the way, she scoops up her underwear and the maple branch he gave her. The creature follows her up, but it’s strange. After feeling his full glory in the water, his land shuffle pains Elisa. He joins her on the little bench, uneasily. Elisa had wanted to call to the chickadee for him, but she finds herself more absorbed in him. You good? she signs.

Good, he signs back.

Sitting there, the creature’s stimulating presence rouses something. A striped snake slides across
Elisa’s ankles. She starts with a gasp. The creature snatches it up and snaps its length, breaking its spine instantly. Then, he offers it to her. She shakes her head, signs: no. You eat.

He does, with surprising neatness and dispatch. It isn’t that different from her eating the live oysters. It’s not the worst way to go, Elisa decides. To be…

Again, the creature offers her the maple branch. He plucks a leaf off it and places it between them, like he placed the oysters before. Elisa shakes her head. Eat? No. Pretty to see. He tastes the leaf himself, then sticks out his tongue in disgust, one eye flickering. Elisa bites down a smile and signs not edible. Don’t eat.

The sky is lightening more. Elisa stands and brushes sand off her body. She puts her soggy underwear and damp dress back on. She’s respectable, barely. A light across the cove catches her eye. One of the white beach houses there has woken up. It looks luxurious: the kind of place she’s never been inside. People who would ban hunting would be kind. They’d help a silent, frightened woman who knocked on their door.

Except that her fears have realigned around the gravity of this being beside her. She feels that nothing frightens her, any more. Not as long as she is with the creature she loves.

Elisa throws her wet sweater and stockings into the shrubs, wedges her red shoe into the tree. The chickadee has a use for it, nest or refuge. She doesn’t. This done, she tiptoes back to the creature. She strokes the gills along her throat, and signs: Thank you. You. Me. Together. Always?

The creature rises, to sign it back and more. You. Me. Together. Good.

Her happiness is beyond words of any kind. They stand there and gaze and gaze at each other.

A third flock of birds startles them both into looking upwards. Elisa taps him and signs, again: together. She points to the birds, and signs, swim. Then, she sweeps her arm south, out over the ocean bay.

He gestures to his own chest. Heart.

Elisa thinks she understands. He wants to go to the heart of his world. South America. The Amazon river. She lifts her chin, smiles, nods. It’s a long way, but she feels all right about it, the same gut feel she’d had when she’d decided to get the creature out of Occam. She knows, now, the more they go on together, the more they will understand each other.

Excited, he plunges out into the shallows, turns and holds out his hand to her. Elisa follows him into the water, tiptoeing slowly. The skirt of her dress lifts in the water, bells out around her like a princess’ gown. (It’ll be different when she’s swimming. The dress won’t make it to the next sunset.)

A noise interrupts her slow progress. It’s a boat, chugging from the estuary to the wider water, its lights on, blowing its horn. The creature trills in fascinated amazement. Elisa can tell he wants to go closer to something that moans and lights up like he does. She splashes over to him and holds him back. Oh, it’s like it’s always been since the moment she saw him. She can’t not help him, not be with him. He’s going to need her on their journey, though not much as she’ll need him.

Elisa realizes she’s gone further than she thought. The water’s up to her collarbones. The creature is swimming around her, now, darting towards the open bay, where the surface of the water is silvering with the dawn. (She’ll realize, in a week, how different her eyes are too, that it will never be really dark for her again.)

It’s Elisa’s turn to swim. The water around her goes cool. There is, suddenly, a current. Elisa reaches
for the creature. He takes her hand and urges her into that current. Draws her down. She still can’t help holding her breath from her mouth, her throat. But, as the first light touches the water, she goes under, gripping his webs and claws.

They are together in his element. She keeps her eyes open, marveling. Around them, the sun is turning the water from dusky blue to shimmering green. Silver fishes and cascades of gold and dark autumn leaves, brought out by the current, turn in the slow tide. (This is nothing to what she’ll see, later. But she’ll always remember it.)

Elisa takes her first knowing breath beneath the surface, mouth and gills. Feels the shape of the water, entering her. And frees her beloved’s hand to swim beside him.

End Notes

*The Shape of Water: Creating a Fairy Tale for Troubled Times* is the official art book for the movie. And it's awesome!

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