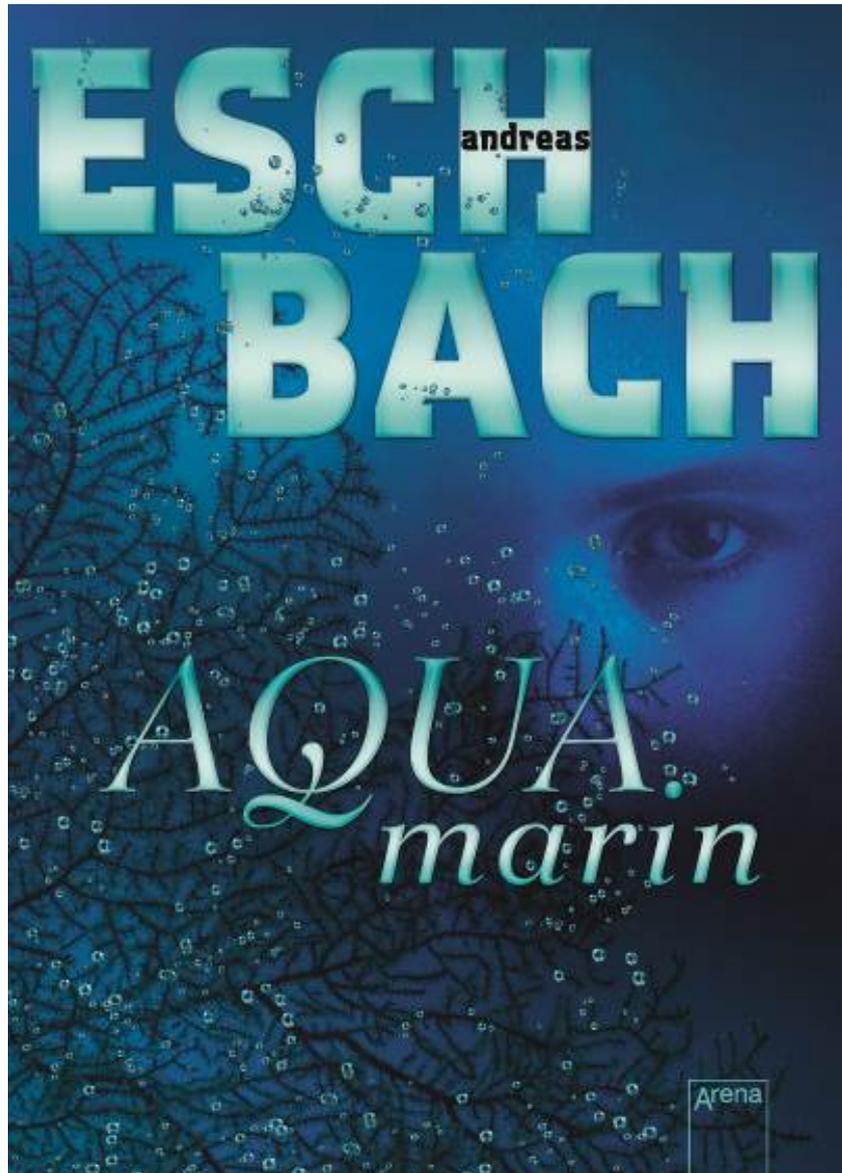


SAMPLE TRANSLATION



AQUAMARINE

by

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Sample Translation by Sheridan Marshall (pp. 203-225)

I stare at the apparition, incredulous. A person. A man, maybe twenty-years-old, muscular, with wavy, shoulder-length hair and strikingly pale skin, bobbing in front of me in the formless blue emptiness of the Pacific and gesturing in sign language. Clumsily, because he is holding a spear in his right hand – or whatever it is – a weapon anyway, which is also pale, as though it has been carved out of a huge bone.

And he actually has the same slits in his chest as me, the same gills. I watch transfixed as they move in time with his breathing, fluttering softly. It's one thing to see that in yourself, but something quite different to observe it in somebody else.

Just like me he is not completely naked, but wears a sort of loin cloth made from a material that I can't identify. It is held up by a belt hung with numerous bags of different sizes.

And he has webbed skin between his fingers. It starts just after the upper joint and extends in smooth arcs to the neighbouring fingers, fluttering gently when the fingers are closed.

My heart is beating wildly. I don't know whether it's still from fear of the shark or from the excitement of this unexpected encounter.

Thank-you, I sign, once the trembling in my arms has subsided. *You saved my life*.

He smiles broadly. He exudes power, power and boundless self-confidence. *The shark was hungry. But he was afraid too. I punched him on the nose and then he scarpered.*

Understood, I reply.

The shark could come back at any time.

What's your name?, the underwater man wants to know.

Saha, I spell it out.

He just gazes at me in astonishment. He doesn't seem to know the sign alphabet.

And who are you?, I ask.

Me? I'm Swim-fast, he explains proudly. He circles me once, as though he wants to show me the meaning of his name and that he really can swim fast. Or perhaps because he wants to eye me up from all sides. *Where is your Together?*, he asks.

I repeat the sign. *Together?* Does the sign have another meaning? If it does then I don't know it.

He stretches out his hand and touches my cheek. Finally he asks: *Where do you come from? I have never seen you here before.*

A sudden shiver runs through me. What am I doing here? Suddenly it feels as though this is all just a dream. As if I'm going to wake up and find myself lying at home in bed.

I live in Seahaven, I explain, and because he obviously doesn't understand the alphabet I add: *in the town above the water*. I point in the presumed direction of Seahaven.

His reaction surprises me. He starts and opens his eyes wide as though I'd said something utterly terrible. Before I can react he has already grabbed my hand and is examining it closely.

As his fingers stroke the sides of mine I realise what he is looking at: I have no webbed skin.

I gesture with my free hand to try and explain why but he doesn't give me chance. He lets me go, spins around and swims off as though the Devil were after him.

He swims really fast. *Really* fast. There is just a shadow, disappearing into the depths in an elegant curve, and a heartbeat later there is nothing at all, he has dissolved into the unfathomable blue.

I float motionless, incapable of moving. For a moment I'm not sure what's up and what's down because it looks as though the world has disappeared and now there is only endless, formless azure blue, in which terms like above and below have no meaning.

Then a shoal of tiny striped fish swim into my field of vision, black and yellow, and I know where I am again.

What I don't know is whether I have really experienced that or just imagined it.

I try to make out the direction in which Swim-fast has disappeared, but there is nothing left to see. As though he was never there.

Perhaps it was just my imagination. Perhaps I've been under water for too long. Perhaps there's not enough oxygen going to my brain, who knows – all sorts of things can go wrong with these genetic manipulations.

I touch my face in the place where Swim-fast touched me. I think of the shark again. I definitely didn't imagine that. And it could return at any time, as soon as its hunger triumphs over its sense of fear. Then it will come back to the place where it has just seen a source of food.

I turn and swim away towards the coast as fast as I can.

By the time I reach the bay and approach the shoreline my arms and legs are shaking. I tell myself it's from the exertion, but perhaps it is also the delayed sense of shock. That I escaped from the shark after all. That I met someone who is like me.

It's difficult to say what has shocked me more. I don't honestly know.

But I know what I have to do now.

The water is getting shallower. I let the waves carry me up to the beach where, in spite of everything, I am in no hurry to leave the sea. Cautiously I fill my lungs with air before sticking my head above water to look around.

The beach is still empty. I tread water for a while and wrestle with the temptation to dive back down again. Finally I glide towards the outermost cliff and go onto the land. My things are undisturbed. I dry my upper body quickly and pull on my T-shirt. After a couple of minutes, when my bikini bottoms are dry, I get dressed and get going.

I don't take the path towards the estate, but the other one that goes into town. I am soon ringing the doorbell of the Bonners' house. Luckily it is Pigrity who opens the door. His eyes widen when he sees me. 'You?'

'I've left my tablet at home, otherwise I would have rung first,' I explain. 'There's something I have to tell you.'

After I've told Pigrity the whole story he just sits there, motionless, staring at a hole in the floor diagonally behind me and thinking. We're crouching on the floor in the middle of the room. There is a smell of roast dinner and wine sauce, a reminder of a special lunch to mark the end of the school year. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, he lifts his head and says, 'You must have been far out then.'

'What?', I say.

'If you saw a shark. There's a shark deterrent system around the coast of Seahaven, for at least two miles.'

'A *what?*'

'Shark deterrent. It works with infrasound somehow. When the sharks hear it they sense danger and swim off somewhere else.' Pigrity looks just like he does at school now when he's said something particularly clever. 'And it has something like a two-mile radius. So you must have swum out further than two miles.'

I swipe my hand impatiently. 'Yes, that might be right. But that's not the point. The point is the man that I met!'

'Yes, of course,' Pigrity says and looks serious again. 'And he looked just like you? With gills and everything, I mean.'

'Yes. Five on each side. And like I said, webbed skin between his fingers.' I show him my fingers with their thin white scars along the sides, extending as far as the upper finger joints. 'My mother had mine removed when I was a baby.'

Pigrity studies my scars and says, 'Yeah, that's the question.'

'The question?' There's something particularly irritating about him today. 'What question?'

'Whether she really was your mother.'

'What?' I gasp for breath. What's *that* supposed to mean?

Pigrit raises his eyebrows. 'It could all mean that she stole you when you were a baby. From a tribe of underwater people.'

'What?', I exclaim. 'Why would she have done that?'

Pigrit points to the desk where his tablet is lying between piles of open books. 'Read the news. Women are always stealing babies when they can't have their own children. Not every week, but often enough.'

I shake my head. 'I don't believe that. I look like my mother. I can show you photos.'

'It's just a theory,' Pigrit says.

'A pretty poor theory, if you ask me. Or have you ever heard of a tribe of underwater people whose babies you can steal?'

'No, you're right.'

It is very quiet in the Bonner house. Pigrit explained when he let me in that his father was out at a meeting with the town council, and none of the staff are around either.

'What if we,' I suggest timidly, because this is the real reason I came, 'what if we have a little look in your father's library?'

Pigrit scratches his chin. 'We can try,' he says and stands up.

As we go through the heavy door we are met by the strange smell of old papers and the incredible stillness that I have never encountered anywhere else. It is as though the books function like a protective wall against the outside world.

Pigrit switches on all the lamps, including some that I didn't notice on my last visit. The rows of books are brightly illuminated. 'Dad's actually begun to unpack all my grandfather's things,' he explains. 'Come on, I'll show you where we're up to.'

He leads me into the row of shelves at the back, the only one without a window at the end. There are a dozen wooden crates piled on top of one another any old how. Three crates have already been opened – the others are covered in dust.

'No one's opened these for at least twenty years,' Pigrit says. He blows the dust off one of the crates and opens the catches. They squeak and are difficult to open and obviously haven't been used for decades. A musty smell emerges as he lifts the lid.

Inside are piles of books, notebooks and written papers. I remember from a visit to a museum that this is how people used to generate texts: on pieces of paper that have to be numbered consecutively so that you know in what order they're supposed to be read.

Manuscripts – that's what these sorts of bundles of paper are called.

'I'm allowed to help sort through the papers,' Pigrit says, 'but not to unpack them myself. Dad's very pernickety about that.' He scans the titles of the uppermost books. 'This all seems to be

about Australian indigenous people, colonisation and all that. It doesn't really help us,' he adds and replaces the lid.

He points to one of the open crates. It is half empty – the contents are piled up on the neighbouring table. There is a piece of paper under each pile with a key word written on it. 'Living conditions,' Pigrit reads out. 'Creation of the zones. History of the underwater building...'

My gaze alights on a clock mounted on the highest shelf opposite, between a book in Japanese and one in Spanish. It is already quarter past. Aunt Mildred will be worrying.

'Ooh,' says Pigrit.

I turn around to face him. He is standing in front of a pile of books and tapping the piece of paper underneath. 'Here, this sounds interesting: *Bio-politics*. This is a new piece of paper. Dad must have been working here this morning without me.'

There are three books, two thin ones and a thick one. Pigrit looks along the row. 'All in Korean. I can't read that.'

I look at the clock again. 'I have to go home,' I say. 'My Aunt is bound to be beside herself because I wasn't home for lunch.'

Pigrit puts the books back carefully. 'I'll ask my dad what they're all about. If I find anything out I'll let you know.'

'But-'

He shakes his head. 'I won't tell him anything. A promise is a promise.'

It smells of Asian spices when I open the door to our house. Aunt Mildred is nowhere to be seen. I press the doorbell which doesn't just ring, but makes all the lights in the house flash briefly.

She appears from the little utility room behind the kitchen, from which the gurgling and hissing sounds of our old washing machine can be heard.

Saha! Where were you? Her gestures betray how upset she is. Even if I'd only been a bit late home she'd have made a scene. But when something goes completely differently from the way she expected it, she always assumes she hasn't understood something. That works in my favour now.

I shrug. *It's a long story.*

I am pretty emotional too and I can't hide it from her. Aunt Mildred has known me my whole life and she is accustomed to paying more attention to what the body says than to words, which always reach her through a filter anyway.

Tell me, she insists and adds: *I thought we were eating lunch together.*

I just shrug helplessly. It's possible that nothing that I thought I knew about me and my life is true – how on earth am I supposed to think about food?

I've kept some for you, she says. Vietnamese stir fry.

I stretch my neck, straighten myself up and say with decisive gestures: *There's something we have to discuss.*

Aunt Mildred looks at me. She knows it's serious. Sometimes she looks at me so intently that it is as if she can read my thoughts, and this is one of those moments.

We go into the living room. She sits down in the arm chair which just leaves me the sofa. I sit down, kick off my shoes and cross my legs. I really want to curl up in a ball and shut out the world, but that's not possible. Maybe later.

So, Aunt Mildred says.

I rub my hands briefly on my trousers. They are damp with sweat. My heart is beating as though I'm about to sit an important exam.

Which might actually be the case.

What was in the letters that Mum wrote to you?, I ask finally.

My Aunt wrinkles her forehead. *Why do you want to know that?*

Thousands of panicked butterflies are fluttering in my stomach. Sometimes I can tiptoe slowly and carefully around delicate topics, but not today. Today I have to get to the point as quickly as possible before I lose the courage and strength to do it.

It's important, I explain, and now it's my hands that are trembling. *I want to know whether she was really my mother or not.*

As expected, Aunt Mildred is horrified. *Child! How on earth can you think that she might not be your mother?*

So I tell her everything. About my diving alone, out into the Pacific. About the man with the gills who I met – and who had known sign language!

The only thing I leave out is the part with the shark. I don't like thinking about it myself; the memory is still too recent and too terrible.

I also don't tell her that I have just been to Pigrit's and that the thought that my mother might have stolen me as a baby and fled to Perth came from him.

Aunt Mildred has turned pale enough even without knowing all that.

When I am finished I let my hands drop. They feel tired, exhausted even. As though I'd pulled a heavy stone away from a vault containing the answers to all my questions.

Or not. It all depends.

My Aunt runs her fingers through her wavy hair absent-mindedly, the way she always does when she's thinking or lost in memories.

When we were children, she begins at last, your mother always invented stories for me. I loved it. And Monica had an incredible imagination. She never had to think about it for long. You just needed to say, 'tell me a story', and she'd be off, on the spot, every time. Sometimes really crazy things. That's why I thought at first... She breathes in, shakes her head. But then it was all very different. Much more complicated.

I looked at her helplessly. *I have no idea what you're talking about,* I say, noticing how angry I am getting.

Aunt Mildred stands up. *Wait. I'll fetch the letters that your mother wrote to me. Then you'll understand.*

The letters? Baffled, I watch her as she leaves the living room and hear her go upstairs into her room. She comes back straight away, carrying a small package – a package made of paper.

Now I understand. That's why I didn't find the letters on her tablet: because my mother wrote her letters on paper!

She sits next to me on the couch. I stare at the bundle in her hand, at all the envelopes with dark-red barcodes. Paper letters. Of course. This method of communication is still practised in many parts of the world, but until now I have only ever seen it on photos in history lessons.

Aunt Mildred orders the envelopes, takes letters out and skim-reads them. I'm amazed by how easily and fluently she can read the handwriting. It's so obvious to her that she never even thinks of asking me whether I can read it, she just passes me the first letter.

I read. The paper crackles in my hand. The letter is over seventeen years old, dated 1st August 2134. I recognise the handwriting from my mother's diary. She writes that she is in a tiny village on the Malaysian coast. She has taken a room with an old woman who she helps around the house and is waiting for a job in a media centre which should start at the beginning of October.

Mrs Tan is even more sprightly than she looks, so I don't have much to do and I have a lot of time. I often go to the beach. There are lots of little bays here where I can be completely alone. I'm really enjoying being able to swim naked again. I'm going to be seamlessly brown by the time my job starts!

Mrs Tan has five sons. They all work in the underwater mines at Kapalai and they enjoy coming to visit during their weeks off. They tell me about their work and about the water spirits they sometimes encounter in the ocean who they blame for all their mishaps. The water spirits sever cables, make holes in pipes and hide important building components. It's funny how seriously they talk about it.

Aunt Mildred passes me the next letter, dated one week later, and points at the following passage:

I wonder whether there might be some truth in the stories about the water spirits after all. When I was swimming today I had the feeling that I was being watched. I turned around in the water and of course looked towards the shore first, expecting that a man or a boy was spying on me. But there

was no one there. But as I was about to carry on swimming it suddenly looked as though there was a pair of eyes looking at me from the crest of a wave!

Strange. I keep asking myself what it was. An unusually-coloured species of jellyfish, maybe? I think I'll get myself a diving mask tomorrow and have a look round under the water.

I look up. Aunt Mildred is looking at me seriously, the next letter pressed to her chest. She hesitates, but then gives it me anyway.

2134-8-11

Dear Mildred, beloved sister,

You won't believe what I'm going to tell you. I have fallen in love, eternally in love with somebody who to all appearances is a mythical creature. I don't know how to explain it to you – actually it's not possible to explain – but I'll at least try.

Do you remember? I wanted to buy a diving mask. And I found one on Saturday at the market, a small, sky-blue plastic toy. I also bought a bikini, bright red and hideous, but the only one I could afford. I decided that while I didn't know whose eyes were watching me in the water I'd rather be wearing a bikini.

And so I swam out again, put my head under water and looked around. There wasn't much to see, and no jellyfish at all. But there was an awful lot of rubbish on the ocean floor, the sort of little bits that only robots can collect, which they probably can't afford here.

No jellyfish, no eyes, for three days. Eventually it seemed stupid to me, and the bikini was uncomfortable anyway, so I left it off and just swam with the diving mask.

And then he suddenly appeared. The water spirit!

But I can assure you: he is no ghost! On the contrary, he is overpoweringly real. A gorgeous, slim, almost white-skinned man wearing only a loincloth, who obviously lives completely underwater.

I can only assume that somewhere here in the Malaysian-Indonesian islands there must be a primitive people that have learned to live under water. Just imagine! My big, strong water spirit has webbed skin between his fingers and toes – and he has gills!

This unbelievable creature just appeared while I was swimming and had my head under water again: he glided beneath me as if we were in some kind of dream, lifted his hands and – you'll never believe it – spoke to me in international sign language!

I couldn't tell you everything he said, just that he was smiling all the time – a smile that went through my whole body like lightning. That I am beautiful, that ever since he first saw me he hasn't

been able to think about anything else and keeps being drawn back to the same place – those sorts of things.

I was utterly, utterly amazed. So amazed that I answered without really thinking about it. I wanted to know who he is. Oh, you should have seen how happy he was that I could understand him, how he virtually exploded with exuberance. I was almost sorry that I had to keep going up to the surface to breathe!

He suggested swimming to the beach. There, sitting in the shallow water, we talked. He explained that he can breathe air too, that it is a very rare ability among his people and that he can only do it for a short time. He couldn't tell me how long – we don't measure time in the same way – but I'm guessing it was barely an hour. After that his neck began to burn from the dryness and he had to go back into the water for at least a night.

We have agreed to meet again tomorrow, imagine! I will definitely go but I think it's a good idea to tell someone where I'm going. You. That's why I'm writing this letter which I will mail today.

I don't know much about his people. He was more interested in talking about me, telling me what he likes about me – especially my wide nose, imagine! He also told me his name, although I'm not sure whether I understood him correctly: Go-up. Is that a name? No idea.

Whatever happens my heart is beating like mad at the thought that I'm going to see him again tomorrow. It's like when I have a fever. There's no way I'll sleep tonight.

It's time to finish writing so that I can catch today's post. Hugs and kisses from afar.

Your crazy sister

Monica

I put the letter down, bewildered. A tribe of primitive people? Can that really be true? And if so – why have I never heard of it? Are there still tribes who have no contact with civilisation? I know of zones in South America where people live in a fairly basic way, but even there they at least have a network connection.

Aunt Mildred studies me carefully.

Is he my father?, I ask.

Instead of answering she passes me the next letter. It was written the following day.

Thursday, 2134-8-12

Dearest Mildred,

I slept with him. I had decided that I definitely wouldn't, at least not during our first meeting. But when I saw him again I forgot all that; I forgot the whole world – it just disappeared. There was just the two of us, the bay, the damp sand and the warm sea water. And so it happened. And I don't regret it, I'll never regret it. It was the most wonderful thing I've ever experienced.

He really is called Go-up. His tribe consists of around sixty people, but there are probably a lot of other tribes. They live off seaweed and raw fish, watch us from afar and find our way of living extremely strange. I didn't find out anything more as we only had an hour before he had to go back into the water to recover and we had much better things to do in that time than talk.

Imagine a totally happy Monica, thinking of you and hugging you from the distant North!

I notice that I'm suddenly feeling hot. It's not ideal reading about your mother's enthusiasm for sex with your father.

I give Aunt Mildred the letter back. She puts it back in the pile and says: *Then at first there were no more letters. I wrote to her but she didn't answer. At least not straightaway.*

Then she pulls out the next letter. It is dated 7th September 2134.

Oh Mildred, loyal sister,

I am so sorry that I haven't replied sooner, but...well, you know what's been going on.

And now it is all over! Earlier today Go-up told me that his tribe was moving on, further South, as far as I can understand. He said that the water is getting worse; I presume because of the mines on the shelf and all the chemicals they put into the water.

And that means we have to say goodbye, probably forever. He doesn't know where they are going and doesn't really know our names for places – it's impossible to arrange to meet anywhere.

At first I didn't want to believe it. Then I cried. He didn't even know that water could come out of eyes!

When I look back now I realise that I had an inkling. The last couple of times Go-up was somehow changed – he almost crushed me when we slept together. He was desperate, but he didn't want to admit it when I asked him what was wrong. Only today. And then I nearly crushed him, during our last time. I kissed him goodbye over and over again and he stayed longer than ever before, until he was coughing because of the dryness and he became really dizzy. I had to lead him back into the water so that he didn't fall over and had to watch as he disappeared into the waves.

I'm so desperately unhappy, Mildred! I keep telling myself that our love would never have had a future anyway, that it could never have been anything other than what it was, but it doesn't make our parting the slightest bit easier.

I'm going to go to the beach again tomorrow and hope, although I know he won't be there anymore.

I'm sorry that I've only written about myself again, but my heart is overflowing with pain and tears and bittersweet happiness.

Yours, Monica

I look at the paper in my hand. The script is blurred in lots of places, as though from tears. The handwriting is shaky. It seems to me that by holding this letter in my hands I am able to feel how it was for my mother.

Aunt Mildred flicks through a whole lot of envelopes with a hand gesture that indicates that there is nothing there that would be of interest to me at the moment, and then gives me a letter dated 21st October 2134.

Mildred,

Imagine: I'm pregnant!

I can still hardly believe it myself. I had the two-year injection that's supposed to be guaranteed, and it wasn't that long ago, I checked, but somehow it hasn't worked. I'd been feeling different for quite a while and had thought of all sorts of things – an infection or an allergy (there are some extremely strange infectious diseases around here, perhaps because of the bio-hackers). Then the doctor told me what's really the matter and I almost fell off my chair!

She didn't want to know who the father is (that sort of thing is a private matter in this zone – just imagine!), and I didn't tell her. But now of course I'm worried. What if I have a child that can only breathe air for an hour a day?

But I'll have to keep these concerns to myself so that the doctors don't think I'm mad. But anyway I can't just come back beforehand; you know what a big deal they'd make at home about a pregnant woman who can't prove who the father is. The population plan is sacrosanct after all!

Frau Tan saw me when I came back from the medical centre and she was really lovely. She made me tea and told me not to worry because it was bad for the unborn child. And that of course I could stay with her until the birth. She seemed really disappointed when I told her that I wanted to go back to Perth afterwards or at least back to the Megafood area.

Aunt Mildred took the letter out of my hand when I got to this point, even though it carried on on the other side of the paper, and passed me the last letter in the pile.

It is very short, just a small strip of card with the following:

2135-5-28

It's a girl! The sweetest, most enchanting creature I have ever seen, and she's my baby! I can still hardly believe it. And she looks healthy and strong. She sleeps for hours already, sighs and dreams, and she breathes calmly and regularly the whole time.

I am going to call her Saha, after the bay where she was conceived.

All love, Monica

I stop. My name is the name of a *bay* in Malaysia? Well, thank-you.

Then, lost in thought, I run my hand over my cheek and am surprised that my hand is wet. There are tears running down my face and I never realised.

I am crying. I am crying for my mother, who I've never in my life felt as close to as I have when reading these letters. Who I miss. Who right now I miss terribly.