

SEA STORIES

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Old Women in Our Village

Old women in my village say
the sea is always hungry, they say,
that's why it comes without fail
to lick the edges of the barrier sand,
rolling through rafts of mangrove,
smashing its salt-steeped flood
on guardian cliffs, breaking itself
against rock faces, landlocks, hills,
reaching through to fields, forests,
grazelands, villages by the water,
country lanes, towns, cities where
people walk about in a dream,
deaf to the wind shushing
the sea's sibilant sighing

somedaywe come
somedaywe come
someday...

Only the old women hear
the ceaseless warning, watching
the grain drying in the sun,
or tending the boiling pot
or gutting a fish for the fire, fingers
bloody, clothes stained, scent of the ocean
rising from the mangled flesh into their lungs.

Nights, as they sit on their mats
rubbing their knees, waiting for ease
to come, and sleep, they hear the sea
endlessly muttering as in a dream

someday someday someday....

Nudging the old men beside them,
their mates—empty-eyed seafarer,
each a survivor of storms, high waves,
and the sea's vast loneliness,
now half-lost in their old age
amid the household clutter—
old women in my village
nod to themselves and say,
one uncharted day, the sea
will open its mouth and drink in

a child playing on the sand,
a fisherman with his nets,
great ships laden with cargo,
and still unsated, they say,
suck up cities towns villages—
one huge swallow to slake its hunger.

As to when or how it would happen,
who knows, the women say, but this much
is true—no plea for kindness can stop it—
nodding their heads this way and that,
tuning their ears to the endless mumbling....

somedaywecomewecomewecome
somedaywecomewecomewecome
somedaysomedaysomeday

The Tricycle Drivers' Tale

On nights when rain pours as if
the very gate of heaven is open,
and nothing to save a shivering earth
from death by drowning,
people in my village rehearse this story—

An empty house in Delgado Street.
A tricycle stops by the locked gate.
A man alights, his wife, cuddling an infant
close to her chest, a boy of five or six
gripping her skirt with bony fingers.
“Delgado,” the man had said, the one word
that brought them to this unlit house
on this lonely street in our village.
Not a sound from them throughout the ride.
Now the man digs into his pockets for fare
and comes up with a few clamshells,
holds them out like coins to the driver.
“Wait here,” says the man, “I’ll get the fare,”
and goes into the unlit house, everyone
following him, but the house never lights up
and the man never returns.
Seized by a strange suspicion,
the driver flees, as fast as he can, terrified,
pursued by the reek of fish in the wind.

This story goes the rounds of Cardo’s motorshop,
Tentay’s *caldohan*, or wherever it is that drivers go
to pass the slow time of day, or when rain forces them
to seek shelter. The story grows with every telling—
barnacles on the man’s neck, his hands, his ears
the woman’s hair stringy like seaweeds
the infant in her arms swaddled in kelp
—and did he have fishtail instead of feet?

The boy's fluorescent stare, as though
his eyes were wells of plankton—
was that a starfish dangling on his chest
seasnakes wriggling in and out of his pockets

The house in Delgado waits empty and dark
as on the day, ten, eleven years ago
when the *M/V Doña Paz* with two thousand
on board, became grub for the sea.
Of that time, the old women in my village
remember coffins on the dockside,
stench in the air, in almost every street, a wake,
funerals winding daily down the streets.

No driver in our village has made a claim
to the telling of this tale, yet the story
moves like a feckless wind blowing
breath to breath, growing hair,
hand, fist, feet with every telling,
and claws to grip us cold.

We cower in the dark, remembering,
grateful of the house above the earth,
the dry bed on which we lie, the warm body
we embrace to ward off the tyranny of rain
pelting our fragile shelter—a mere habit
of those who breathe air and walk on land,
you might say, but still, always in our mind,
the sea grumbling grumbling sleeplessly—

somedaywelcome
somedaywelcome
somedaysomedaysomeday....

Rafael: Ormoc, A.D. 1991

First the rain. Then the flood
rolling down the mountain,
flushing the city to the sea, all
in thirty minutes flat, and then gone.
Dazed, huddled in any shelters they could find,
no one in the city slept that night, waiting
for news, counting the missing, the dead,
hoping for the rare miracle.
Everyone hungry, terrified, cold.
Darkness but for guttering candles
and sooty kerosene lamps.
The drowned littered the city streets,
huge abandoned dolls with arms held out,
legs spread and bent as in prayer or embrace.

He was the one to walk to look for our dead.
A slow walk with throngs of others
from Cantubo Bridge to the shorelines
of Sabang and Alegria. He started from sun-up.
At mid-afternoon, he found the bodies floating
face down among hundreds of others
in the shallows of Linao—father, brother and his wife,
and one of three children. He was tired. Enough,
never mind the infants whose bodies might have
shredded in the debris. Out of the water
he pulled them with the help of strangers,
brought them to Ormoc's hilltop graveyard,
laid them all in one grave, no coffin, no ritual,
no grieving, so tired he was, not even grief
could blight his need for rest, food and drink.

That's as it should be. You understand,
we arrived much later, three days after the flood.
We visited the common grave as he had urged,
and found everything satisfactory. That task,
finding the bodies, and the burial, was his alone
to do. Gathered around the neat mound

his spade had formed over the grave,
we were empty of words, just as he was.
He's not mentioned that time since.
We soon left the graveside—we still had to dig out
the old house from the silt, the hearth to make anew,
the altar to rebuild. More urgent to us then, the claims
of the living, than mere obeisance to the dead.

Twenty years since, and now, he too, like us,
is growing old. We still do not talk about that time.
Everything behind us, that's what we'd like to think.
The streets of Ormoc have been repaved, houses rebuilt,
the river that runs through its heart tamed, so it seems,
by thick strong concrete dikes.
But who could feel safe now?
As the moon waxes and wanes, so the tide too
rises and ebbs—a daily ritual the sea could not help.
Behind his eyes watching the waves, the terror lurks
unappeased—when will the sea grow hungry again?

Somedaywecome somedaywecome
Wecomewecomewecome ... someday ...

Sendai, March 10, 2011

Michiko chan
was picking flowers
the day the rocks
heaved and the sea
rose on its toes
to kiss the hillsides.
Now a thousand things
litter the beach at Sendai—
boats, houses, cars,
bottles, shells, felled trees,
animal bones, broken bodies.

O Michiko, I dreamed
to see you this spring
under the sakura orchard
with the moon glow caught
in your black hair.
Now on the sand at Sendai,
these drying seaweeds.
Among the seagrasses,
these countless shoes
in hues of orange, blue, pink, red
gay yellow, all without pairs.

I want to ask the sea,
Which one is Michiko's?
but no use. The water
has nothing to say
from its deep black heart.
Only the little waves
drift back to me, licking
my feet, sighing, almost—

cannotsay
cannotsay
cannot
say—