**The Fisherman**

He rises in the dark. His clothes are folded on the chair in the corner of the bedroom and he dresses quietly, so as not to awaken the woman asleep in his bed. In the kitchen he boils water, grinds beans, makes coffee, drinks it hot and bitter. He does not lock the door behind him when he leaves.

It is a cold morning but he knows it will be a hot day. All the mornings are cold, and all the days are hot. He feels the hard-edged stones of the gravel road through his shoes; the soles are feeble. The road hugs the curve of the hillside and he leaves it just before the bend, feels the grass soft like hair under his feet. His pale gray shoes turn darker gray from the moisture of the dew. His gait is awkward, his knees hopping because of the slope.

The hill ends abruptly at the sea. There are a few feet of thick mud bank where the tides lick the lips of the island. The pier reaches out beyond this, the wood heavy with seawater and sagging with rot. This summer he will replace the boards that have become too soft to bear his weight.

His grandfather built the pier many years ago. Then, when a plank rotted and became unsound, he replaced it with a new one. Later, his father used the pier and replaced the planks of wood that sagged and decayed, and later still, he did. For many years, the planks rotted and were replaced and rotted anew as the sea slurped hungrily at the posts. His grandfather did not build this pier. He built it himself, many times.

The boat taps softly against the wooden post to which it is tied, old metal against old wood. He climbs aboard. The floor sways as he walks the vessel, checking that all is in place, all is in order, but he hardly notices the rocking. He pours more gasoline into the engine, and notes at the sloshing of the plastic canister that he will soon need to buy more.

The sun blinds him momentarily as he steers out of the cove. Already its yellow is fading to hot white. Today will be a hot day. All of the mornings are cold, and all of the days are hot. He will catch no fish today.

He rises in the dark. He does not lock the door behind him when he leaves into the cold morning that will soon become a hot day. He hop-skips down the slope to the sea. He boards the boat, unties it from its post, steers it out of the cove and into the open sea. He drives out past the sun, rising hot white from the distant edge of the water. The rolling white V of the boat’s wake unfurls behind him, the wind whips his face, his eyelashes blink. He will catch no fish today.

He has been told it is unlucky to sail a boat without a name. His boat has a name, he tells the superstitious, but she is an old boat and the paint has worn away. They tell him he should repaint it bright and bold on the starboard side. He agrees, and then he does not paint the boat.

He wakes in the dark on Sunday but does not rise. The white curtains glow pale blue and he watches them, unmoving, as the glow rises to soft pink and then the gentle gold of day. He listens to the breathing of the woman in bed beside him, the sweet phlegmy crackle of her snores, and beyond her breaths he imagines he hears the sea, the waves folding and unfolding against the shore. The sea is too distant to hear, but the air is rich with its salty breath.

He stays in bed when the woman rises. He listens to the sound of her urination, the flush of the toilet, the rush of water against the sink basin. He knows the way the floorboards sigh under the weight of her sturdy feet.

They drink coffee and eat eggs. The radio sings to them. When they were young, on Sundays they slept late into the morning because their bodies were heavy with the dance and drink of the night before. She wore dresses with bright flowers. Sometimes in the evenings they walked down to the west shore of the island to watch the sunset, and he kissed her in the mornings while she slept. These were the days when the afternoons saw him steer his boat into the harbor, nets saturated with the glistening scales of fish. In those days, his muscles pressed against the seams of his clothes, thick with youth and tight with the daily effort of hauling the many gleaming bodies into market.

When he comes home in the evenings, he hands her the crumpled paper money he has earned from the day’s catch. She flattens the wrinkled bills on the table with the dull edge of a knife and counts them as the metal grinds against the hard-worn wood. A good haul today? she might say, and he answers yes, a big catch of anchovies. He answers yes, good season for mackerel. He answers yes, brought in a huge mullet today.

He rises in the dark and hears the rustle of light rain against the roof. The light, when it comes, is damp and gray. He pours more coffee into a thermos and carries it under his soon-slick plastic poncho. He follows the gravel road and leaves it just before the bend. The grass of the hillside is wet, the soil soft, but the rain has not yet reached deep enough to form mud. He hop-slide-skips down the slope to the sea. The rain has washed the salt from the air; it tastes like cold humid.

The gray of the sea matches the gray of the boat hull. The waves shiver with droplets and clouds slouch low on the horizon. The rain will keep falling, but no storm. He climbs aboard and unties the boat from the post, steers it out of the cove and into the open sea. The raindrops prick his face like many tiny, playful needles. Beneath him, the water is dark and thick. He will catch no fish today.

The soup is already hot when he comes home. The woman fills his bowl and they eat together. Outside, the rain has lessened to a silent mist blowing softly through the open windows. His wet hair drips onto the table, into his soup. The woman wraps a gray towel around his shoulders and he thanks her. He hands her the crumpled paper money from the day’s catch and she flattens the wrinkled bills against the hard-worn wood of the table. A good haul today? she asks. Big load of sardines, he replies. He swallows another mouthful of soup.

The sky blazes at sunset. The rain has passed and the empty clouds drift northwards. The waters are full and calm. The woman sings as she washes the dishes, her voice gentle and off-key. The pots clang in the small sink and the man watches the sky—fire-red, blood-red.

He rises in the dark. His knees creak like dead wood in strong wind, his steps are low to the floor. In the kitchen, he makes coffee and drinks it hot and bitter, and it is still warm inside him when he goes out into the cold morning.

The wood planks of the pier exhale like a sponge when he walks them, soft and saturated with seawater. Soon he must replace the boards that have become too weak to bear his weight, install new wood to age and rot and soak up water. He has built this pier many times and he will build it many more times. Until the day he doesn’t, when the pier will finally soften into the sea.

He climbs aboard the boat, starts the motor. It buzzes steadily and for a few moments the acrid-sweet smell of gasoline overwhelms the smell of the sea, but this passes as he motors out of the cove. The clean sea air blows against his face, through his eyelashes. The sun is a glaring white bead hovering above the eastern horizon. He will catch no fish today.

The island sits like a shadow on the water far behind him. He knows that he cannot be seen from shore. There are a few minutes of silence when he turns off the motor before he hears again that the silence is not silent—there is the soft lapping of wave water against the hull, the grassy rustle of his hair in the wind. He feels the heat of the sun on him like the press of a hand, feels the moisture gathering on his back, his forehead, his upper lip. He licks his mouth and it tastes like the sea.

He waits long hours under the hot sun. Horizon surrounds him on all sides, broken only by the low shadow of the distant island. He watches silhouettes appear and disappear, dolphin fins breaking the surface, ships gliding past in the distance. He drinks water from a canteen; it is warm. Far off, a shape appears, then grows. It is a ship. It is coming towards him.

The ship meets him. They know that they cannot be seen from shore.

The cargo sits among the nets and ropes that have not been in the sea for many years but still lie in the bottom of the boat. Skinny brown arms, bulbing knees, elbows, shoulders, wide eyes. Today, two boys. They do not speak and he does not speak as he drives the boat along a long arc around the island, then across the flat water towards the mainland that will soon surface from the sea before them. This cargo, silent and precious.

He rises in the dark. He does not lock the door behind him as he goes out into the cold morning. He hop-skips down the hill-slope and boards the boat, unties it, steers it out of the cove and out into the open sea, sails it out past the sun—yellow, but already searing to hot white. Behind him, the island retracts to a shadow low on the horizon until he knows that he cannot be seen from shore. Here he waits under the hot sun. He will catch no fish today.

He brings cargo to the mainland. Bills and bodies change hands. He drives the boat back along the long arc around the island, returns to the cove from the open sea beyond the island. The trail of his unfurling wake dissolves; the sea holds no tracks.

When he comes home in the evening, he hands her the crumpled paper money he has earned from the day’s catch. She flattens the wrinkled bills with the dull edge of a knife and counts them as the metal grinds against the hard-worn wood of the table. Good haul today? she asks. Seabass, he says.

As a young man, he rose in the dark and sailed out of the cove and into the open sea, glaring back at the sun that so viciously glared at him as it climbed the eastern sky. He threw nets and lines and ropes into the ocean and hauled them back up, and sometimes they were heavy with wet struggling bodies and sometimes they were empty and those times he threw them back and threw them back again until they came up full. The sun beat on him with the pressure of a hand and he cursed the heat, and he cursed the sea for being so unwilling to give up its riches, for making him work so hard to bring the nets up full. His hands were thick with callus and still they bled, his muscles hard as stone and still they ached. He did not love the sea.

Still I haul bodies, he would tell her, if she found out, if she asked. Still I bring crumpled bills for you to flatten against the hard-worn wood, still you count them. His catch comes to him from the sea. Silver bodies, brown bodies—cargo, silent and precious.

He rises in the dark, hop-skips down the slope to the boat, motors out of the cove and out to sea. Here he waits long hours under the hot sun until a ship meets him where they cannot be seen from shore. Bills and bodies change hands. Today, a woman and her infant.

The woman is quiet except when she is coughing. The infant cries weakly, mewls like the hungry cats that lurk between stalls in the fish market. In the days when he hauled silver bodies, he kicked cats away from his catch, scared them off with slaps of rope when they did not shoo. He has not heard sounds like these in many years.

The woman is quiet except when she is coughing, and when she is coughing she is coughing blood. Her chapped lips are wet with red.

He steers the boat along a long arc around the island, then on towards the mainland. The long line of land crawls up from the horizon and tears crawl up from the woman’s eyes, saltwater dripping onto the infant’s face. She leaves bloody kisses on its forehead. She does not speak and he does not speak but she looks at him, wet eyes wide and demanding and frightened to be demanding.

The boat lands on a rocky stretch of beach. Sand grains big as gravel grind against the hull as he forces it aground. The grains are ground concrete, broken stone, shards of glass, softened by the scrape and pressure of the other grains as they roll in and out under the waves. The beach is dark and dirty, and empty. He gestures for the woman to step out of the boat. He offers her his hand. She does not move.

Men will come for you, he tells her, They will take you to the next place. But his words are not words to her. He gestures, tries to take her hand, takes her arm and tugs until finally she rises and strides over the edge of the boat onto the mainland. He feels the hard-edged stones of the gravel beach through the feeble soles of his shoes. Her feet are bare. The hem of a wave slips over her toes, crashes against her ankle, like waves crashing against a cliff.

Men will come and take you to the next place. She looks at him and does not speak, wet eyes wide and demanding and frightened to be demanding and then her face breaks and sobs crack in her throat and she thrusts the infant towards him, to him, and when he does not take it she presses it to him and lets it go and he is holding the infant and he tries to give it back to her but she chokes on tears and blood, she throws a wad of crumpled bills at him from a pocket beneath her breast and turns and runs up the beach, screaming. Little splashes erupt where her feet slap the hem of the waves.

She is smaller now, growing smaller. Her screams disappear beneath the crash of wave on gravel. The infant mewls. It wears a crown of blood and saltwater.

He will chase after her and make her take it back. He will wait for the men to come and give it to them. He will bring it into the town and find someone to take it. He will take it to the convent on the hill. He will leave it on a doorstep. He will leave it on the beach. But its eyes—so big and soft.

The woman is beating the dirt from rugs. The mats crack with each smack of her stick, deep slaps caught and kept by the muffling carpet. Her forearms are firm, her stance wide, and saltwater beads between her breasts. She waves to him as he comes up the gravel road and she sees that he carries a bundle. Perhaps he has brought her flowers. But he has brought her something else.

The storm comes up hard and fast from the south. Rain strikes the roof like a swarm of hammers; electricity builds behind closed windows and the air is humid and heavy. Thunder shatters the sky and rattles the door in its frame, the windows in their casings, ruptures the thick air into waves that slap them. Then the storm passes.

In the evening they walk together to the west shore of the island. The sky blazes. The sun calms, white to gold to shining copper, and slides gently behind the edge of the horizon. Her hair smells of salt, of sea and sweat, and he breathes it all the way to the bottom of his lungs as he holds her, as she holds the infant, as the infant sleeps, as they watch the staining of the sky—fire-red, blood-red.