

AMONG THE WRECKAGE



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Early one morning in the spring of 1947, a dark blue trawler, once used for fishing, pushed slowly across the flat of the Pacific. It had been abandoned by the Japanese on the banks of a river in Cheju Island, and the old farmer named Bey had claimed it as his own. He now stood at the helm, aloft the deck. He was shirtless and his pale ashen beard hung past his neck, cinched toward the bottom with a piece of twine. His skin was dark and speckled with moles. Below him, his wife, Soni, lay toward the bow. She was asleep. Her right arm covered her eyes to shield the sun. Her hair, like a thin cloud, curved over her shoulder and across her chest. The sea was calm. Above them flew albatross, in the shape of teardrops. They headed east, toward Japan. Bey was following them.

Two days had passed since a thunderous roar shook their village and the forest canopy swayed as a cluster of long-winged planes stormed over them like burned, fleeing angels. A group of villagers, including all the children, rushed to the coast where they saw what resembled a vaporous tsunami rise up toward the east, whitening the noonday sky. And then the waves sped away, followed by a long echoing shudder. They recalled the bombs of two years before and remained silent. The noise faded. Then the waves calmed, the air stilled. Their world returned to as it was before.

What occurred was not revealed until the following morning, when word spread from the mainland.

The Americans, they were told, had been testing. This had become common. They targeted islands. On the ones that were inhabited, they dropped square flyers from the sky, urging evacuation. It had been this way since the victory over Japan. What the pilots did not know, however, was that the coasts of this particular island, east of Cheju, were used by fishermen to collect shellfish and seaweed. And so the belly of these planes opened, releasing over seventy red-fisted bombs that cut clouds. Out of the hundred men who were missing was Bey and Soni's forty-year-old son.

They waited a full day for his return. And when he didn't come, Soni and Bey embarked to seek him. The villagers stood on the riverbank to watch them go.

This was at dawn, and now they had been at sea for an hour. The boat moved slowly. The sun rose against them and they felt its heat wash their skin. Soni, for the first time in two days, slept, though as soon as she was settled into it, the engine of a plane, like terror, woke her. She rose, startled, her hair slipping off her chest. Bey descended from the helm and, holding the rails, went to her.

"It's nothing," he assured her, as the engine noise faded. He wasn't certain. It was something to say. He listened to his own breathing, his wife's. They kept in rhythm with each other. They held hands. Her fingers were calloused. The sky revealed contrails, dissipating.

She believed him. He could tell by the way her face grew calm, as though she were returning to sleep. She looked at the sea and yawned. The sun hit what remained of her teeth. But then, in a quick motion, she stood and leaned over the rails and pointed to the waters.

Bey attempted to follow the path of his wife's finger. "What is it, Soni?" he asked. All he saw were the undulations of shadows. So he watched her instead, the peak of her nose, her dimming eyes, her arched back like the blade of a scythe from the years in the fields. Her chin that curved, slightly, where he used to cup his hand and bring her to him.

"Over there," she said, pointing far in the distance. "They're leaving."

Soni was convinced she had spotted dolphins. Bey scanned the surface of the sea. Nothing. And so he shut his eyes and recalled their image, silver-backed and as quick as spirits. He thought of their son and understood then what it was to grieve. He leaned against his wife, who did not know his thoughts, and he said, "Yes, my love, they are leaving."

Bey and Soni had known each other as children. And in those early years, as their parents spent the days in the fields, they would do their chores together. The houses there were raised slightly on stilts and the ground beneath was used as a pen for pigs. The pigs fed off the family's waste, which Bey and Soni threw down through a hole in the kitchen. The children washed clothes and bathed in the river, scraping each other's backs with rough cotton rags, their bodies bent and shivering from the dawn water. They braided each other's hair. They wove wide-brimmed hats and moccasins out of straw. Every year, when the Japanese inspectors visited, they filled sacks of barley as offering for the Emperor.

Bey was thirteen when he asked these officials whether they took the grains for themselves. He was struck on the side of his face with the butt of a rifle. They were standing in front of Bey's house. He fell. Soni kneeled to cover his head, and when she looked up at them they hit her mouth. When Bey regained consciousness, he saw her lying there, beside him. She covered her face and what resembled the juices of berries leaked out between her fingers.

She lost her front teeth. They found one on the ground. The other, she told Bey, she had swallowed. Like a seed, she said. It was growing already. And then she opened her mouth for him to pour drops of water down her throat.

When he first kissed her he slipped his tongue into that space where her teeth had been. She pressed her other teeth together and surrounded his tongue. In this way he filled a space.

Their marriage took place when Bey turned sixteen. It was in the evening as the sun set and the winds, from the sea, cut through the trees and blew against the bonfire. They celebrated through the night

and at sunrise the newlyweds went on a treasure hunt in the forest. The women and children of the village had hid their wedding presents—candies wrapped in wax paper, chopsticks, bean curd, pouches of jasmine rice—inside trees, on branches, and under rocks.

They searched without bothering to change out of their wedding clothes. Soni wore a silk gown with a ballooned skirt and wide sleeves, the top folded over her breasts and tied around her waist by a ribbon. Bey was dressed in clean linen pants that fell to his shins, and a new pair of straw moccasins that Soni had made him. They stopped several times to face each other. Against a tree she told him to sit and in the early morning, sleepy and drunk with wine, she braided his hair and twisted it into a bun above his head the way all the married men did. Afterwards, with their pockets stuffed with gifts, they fell asleep.

With the treasure hunt, the amount of presents you did not find was the amount of children the wife would bear, the undiscovered gifts returning through a life. They found all but one. What that lost gift was, no one identified.

Soni gave birth to their son a year later, on the floor of their house. Bey, along with his father, remained outside. They faced the forest and looked through the trees. They heard her and the frightened pigs brushing up against the pen. And then they heard the child. The infant was given to Bey to hold. He brought him close to his face. From his skin rose the copper smell of Soni's insides. Bey licked his thumb and wiped away the stains across the infant's brow.

From then on, the days leapt. The child grew. His limbs lengthened. His face formed. He resembled them both, his mother's nose, his father's thick eyebrows. When his hair grew long enough they braided it.

During the monsoon season, when the straw of the house whistled from the leaking winds and the floors shook, the boy learned to walk across the house, with care, as an old man would, and he touched Soni, who was attempting to boil rice, and then returned and touched Bey on his head. After the winds calmed and the house settled he ventured to the window and looked outside in wonder, as though they were somewhere else.

When the boy was older, in the winters, Bey carried him on his back

to watch the sea at dusk, and when it darkened they witnessed the maps of constellations appear, one by one, and the child held on to his father's ears and leaned back as far as he could. The boy watched his breath puff like clouds. He asked Bey what kind of fish swam among the stars.

They were happiest then.

The boy grew to love the sea. And distances. When he was old enough, he joined a fishing crew. Soni wanted him to stay. To help with the fields. He would be at sea for weeks, months. Bey wished the same, though he didn't voice his concerns.

He left at the age of fifteen on a ship with sails. It departed from the river beside their village as Bey and Soni stood on the bank. Their son waved until the ship disappeared around a bend, the masts blended within the hanging limbs of trees. On the river the ship's wake faded.

From that moment on, they would see him when time allowed it. The days, which had gone so quickly, slowed and lengthened. Bey and Soni's parents passed away. It was the two of them now. And in each other's company was the overwhelming reminder of absence.

Bey began to feel the effects of aging. He grew tired easily, his muscles ached, he slept less. He remained in the fields long after sunset, standing there, and recalled his own childhood, his parents and Soni in their youth.

On the nights when he couldn't sleep, he took walks through the forest in search of what was missing. He didn't tell Soni. Beside the river he imagined the limbs of trees as the masts of ships. He smelled the night water, light and cool, like mint. As the years progressed he walked farther. To the coast. There he undressed and swam into the sea, to where the moon lay reflected.

Afloat, he thought of the treasure hunt and the single gift they hadn't discovered. He still wondered what it was and where it now lay. He wondered whether an animal had taken the gift for its own purposes or whether it was still there, buried or high up in a tree, used for a bird's nest.

There were now days when it seemed that all his life he had been looking. And it was then that a sadness took hold of him, as though a part of his life had been taken from him.

In the Pacific, a war had begun, and his son lived within it. They all waited.

Bey bathed in the luminous dark of the beach, scrubbing his back and soaking his hair and his beard. He stood upright to clean his chest. He opened his mouth up toward the metallic stars and waited for one to fall.

The trawler lacked navigation equipment so Bey used a compass and a map his son had given him on his fiftieth birthday. He had never seen a map so intricate before. The ones he had grown accustomed to were approximations, errors corrected over them, again and again, so that what he held was a palimpsest created on rice paper by a fisherman, the islands unnamed. This one—the one he looked at now—his son had bought at a port on the mainland, by a British mapmaker. It was well proportioned and colored, the outlines of all the Pacific islands in bright green, each one named, though that mattered less. Unable to read, fishermen guessed at the islands' identities through their shapes. Here was Cheju. And north, there, a portion of the mainland, and in the east was Japan, both carefully jagged. It was how he imagined the crescent moon might appear if one were to ever see it up close. Flawed and ravaged.

Bey folded the map and stood beside the starboard rails, watching the sun distance itself from its reflection against the hollow waves. The albatross hovered over them. The boat's low hum was steady and it massaged the soles of his bare feet. He slipped his fingers through his beard, which he often did, the way one would sift through sand. To his left, on deck, his wife sat and braided her hair. Turning, he went into the cabin.

On a shelf, beside the closet, was a tin box, and in the far corner of the room a large bucket filled with cold barley tea. The boat rocked against a wave and he steadied himself against the wall, discolored from the humidity. He tucked the box under his arm and then filled a cup with tea and went to his wife. She took the cup with both of her hands, bowing her head to thank him, and she brought it to her lips. He sat beside her and opened the lid of the box. Inside were dried squid, flat-

tened, in the shape of spears. They lay one on top of each other and were the color of sand. Bey lifted one out of the tin and tore it in half, giving one side to Soni. They each then pulled off the tentacles, one by one, and chewed in silence. It tasted sweet at first, then bitter, its texture elastic. He ate slowly and smelled the heavy salt of the air.

His wife's lips were chapped from the winds. They were thin and hadn't changed in over half a century. He dipped his fingers into the cup of tea and then pressed them against Soni's lips. He felt her aged skin, her face, as if she were shrinking each and every day. He was, too—perhaps they would be whittled to the size of a pocket. He thought of death in this way. A diminishing.

After some time, she said, "Bey, do you think there are many?"

Twenty boats, they had said. Moored along the coasts. How many men were on them was hard to tell. The hulls and the masts split, consumed by a deafening fire, and he imagined the men flung toward the clouds, as though a sea creature had spit them out. They fell, as if from a great distance, and the water, he imagined, was as merciless as solid ground.

She said it again: "Do you think there are many?"

As many as our village, he wanted to say, but did not. He told her instead that he was uncertain and she accepted it, taking comfort in his statement, for uncertainty was what pulled them toward an island they had never seen before.

"He could have been inland," she said, more to herself, as she continued to look out at the empty sea. There wasn't another boat in sight or the sound of a plane again, the roar, which was a sound that encompassed and paralyzed and forewarned. For now he saw a world that was the blue of peace and rooted in logic.

It was possible. He could have been inland. Bey thought it as well. Who would not? Their son was prone to wandering. He liked docking and seeing the town where he and his fellow crewmembers delivered fish. He would bring back stories and souvenirs for his parents. Some fruit, simply because it had grown elsewhere. Woven bracelets for his mother, one she wore now, made from a strip of tanned leather. For Bey, a bamboo cane, which he hung up on a hook, refusing to use it.

They began to call him sailor and waited for him along the river when he returned. "Sailor, what land have you seen?" they joked with him as he disembarked from his boat. "What gifts do you bring?" And he would say, "I have come from the stars, Mother, I have seen the planets." He bowed and they embraced him, his hair smelling of fish and the seas, and Bey touched his son's face and pulled on the young man's beard, thick and dark, and together they walked through the forest, listening.

He grew to be taller than both of them. There was about him a calm, as though he took with him the flat surface of the sea in late afternoon and cupped it to his ear.

Sitting beside Soni, Bey inhaled the air, breathing deeply. They would arrive soon, he kept telling himself. But stillness turned into immobility. It seemed the boat had stopped altogether, with equal parts of the ocean in all directions, and he stood and walked up to the helm. But no, they were moving, albeit slowly, and they were on course. He heard the boat's engine. They were traveling as fast as it could go. He descended again. He thought of his son's calm and wondered whether it remained with him until the very end. He kicked the floor of the deck. Soni didn't turn. Or perhaps she did. He couldn't tell.

He brushed his hands against the cabin window. They were dirty, so Bey wrapped an old shirt of his around a stick he found, plunged it into the ocean, and then lifted, his muscles straining, the old shirt darker and dripping. He wrung it. He worked methodically, like someone who had dipped a shirt into the sea a thousand times before. Then, using the shirt, he wiped the windows, all of them, leaving streaked arcs. When he finished he pressed his nose against the glass and saw his reflection. He then lifted his hands up close to his eyes, close enough so that he could see the lines of his palms. He had lately found himself doing this often, guessing the distance of his hands to his face and whether it was lessening. There were times when he thought he was losing his vision. He stared at his palms and saw the geography there, the rivers and the roads and the paths. He stretched his fingers. Between them he saw blue.

The night before, he had spent hours attempting to recall his son, to distinguish his face. It was vague to him. Out of focus. Bey lay on a worn blanket on the floor, which he halved so that a part of it could cover his body. Soni lay beside him. The room smelled of sesame oil. The window was open and he heard the winds. He shut his eyes. Opened them. The light of evening splayed through the window. He could not clarify. He could not remember the last thing they spoke of, some final words.

He reached toward Soni's hair. He lifted the strands then let them fall. He imagined they were the withered fingertips of ghosts. She had wanted to go with him. He said no. She persisted. He urged her not to come. She called him a coward, selfish. Earlier that evening she stood in the corner of the room, her eyes ablaze. She made a fist and hit her stomach, said, "He is mine," and they fought, because fighting did not require thought.

Afterward she lay on top of him and pressed the side of her face against his chest, and they sweated from the heat, not minding it. She said, "I am listening to your heart. I am listening to the sea. And I am scared." He looked up at the ceiling, at a straw roof that seemed to spread the longer he stared, until he saw a vast network of fingers extending. His son's hands were thick and scarred and calloused from the nets, from the war, and they were always cold and always beautiful.

On the lip of the horizon a dark object in the shape of a thumbnail rose against the sky. Soni saw it first. She stood and steadied herself against the rails of the deck and leaned forward, as though she thought the boat could go faster by her doing so. She resembled an eager child in this position, with her hair braided behind her head, her round face. "Hurry," she called to her husband. And although it was impossible for the boat to go any faster, it did seem that their speed was increasing. The island grew taller and wider until its shape began to morph, sharp angles appearing that could have been trees or the back of a mountain. But the longer Bey concentrated on the image, the more certain he grew that it wasn't their destination. Perhaps it was a surfacing whale, swimming toward them.

But no, it was not a whale. Less fluid, less mobile. The shape of it was now fixed. It moved while being still. It shone metallic under the sun, which was now directly above them. A drop of sweat caught in Bey's eyelashes and he blinked, wiping his forehead. When he looked up again he saw what it was, and he felt a tightening, and the beat of his heart, and he grew afraid.

"Seek cover," he told his wife.

He took her by the shoulders. Gripping the rail, she walked with care against the urgency of his palms. "Bey," she said. "Don't hold so tight." She looked up at him and they exchanged a brief smile. He relaxed his grip.

In the cabin, underneath a mat, was a door leading down into a storage compartment below the floor, a small room he never used. He rolled the mat over and then lifted open the door. A stale, humid scent arose toward them. He helped Soni descend the planks of wood. He held her hand and her arm strained as she descended. And only when she was fully lowered did he let go.

Daylight stopped at the edge of the entrance. Soni's face was shadowed and her eyes were bright, like the eyes of the hares in the island's mountains. "You stay until you hear me say your name," he told her. "Or you stay until you hear nothing. You wait for the engines to fade." He said all this as though he were speaking from afar. He hesitated.

"Bey," she said. "I will be fine."

And then she lifted her hand and waved. He pushed the door and watched whatever light was down there close like a shell. She was still waving. He replaced the mat. He looked about the cabin once more. He checked the closet that held his son's spare fishing gear, which he had never used. Using the cup, he took some of the barley tea and poured it over the net and the pole.

The engine he heard was much louder than his trawler. It sounded like a crowd clapping, sharp and rapid. He stepped out on to the deck.

The patrol boat was American. He noticed the colors and the design of the small flag folding in the wind. The boat, still rumbling, slowed as it approached the trawler. Toward the stern a soldier sat on a chair. In front of him was a long-barreled rifle on a stand, which the sol-

dier panned, back and forth, across the length of the trawler, until it settled on Bey. Another gun stood toward the bow, manned by a boy, it seemed, the chair larger than the width of his shoulders and chest. Bey numbered the visible men. Six.

He cut the engine. He placed his hands on the rails, where they could be seen. The patrol boat turned so that its port side ran parallel to Bey's starboard. There were words painted white onto the side. The two boats were within five, six meters of each other. He could see the men's faces now, their pale blushed skin, their thick forearms. One of the men, however, was a mainlander, young, in his thirties perhaps. He carried a megaphone, which he raised in front of his face. Through the machine he spoke in their language, translating the Americans' words.

They wanted to know where he resided. What his purpose was in the seas. His destination. How long he expected to be out here.

Bey ran his fingers through his beard. Where his bare feet touched the deck seemed fragile, unstable, as though the floor would soon collapse. He concentrated on Soni's silence, willed it, and wondered whether her eyes were open or shut. He looked down to see that he was on his toes, straining. He answered them with brevity, attempting to mask the island's dialect as much as he could.

He told them he lived in Udo. He was fishing. It was for leisure.

"And the boat?" the translator said, his voice hollow through the speaker. "That's your boat?"

"Yes."

The man lowered the speaker and spoke to another man whom Bey assumed was the captain. The men behind the guns continued to aim at him.

The translator and two soldiers were going to board. The boat floated closer and the three of them hiked their legs up over the rails and stepped on to the trawler's deck. They wore black boots, laced up. He had never seen boots before. And the Americans. They were so tall. Their skin was peeling around the bridges of their noses. Their eyes appeared bored, although their hands were alert, gripping their weapons.

The translator approached Bey. "There are smugglers," he said. "From the mainland to Cheju. Do you know anything about this?"

Bey shook his head. He lived in Udo, he repeated, not Cheju.

"Yes, you've said that."

The Americans searched the boat. They wanted to know where his fishing equipment was. Bey told them it was in the cabin, in the closet. He walked toward them but he was pulled back by a hand. The translator's fingers were warm and Bey felt each finger against his skin. He hadn't started yet, he called to the men now searching the cabin. He hadn't caught anything. He heard the clinking of tin.

"You're heading east," the translator said. "Toward Japan."

"Not too far," Bey said. "Far enough for quiet."

He heard steps. The rattle of their weapons clanging. He heard shifting. He felt the breath of the mainlander behind him and judged the distance between his own body and the man's rifle. He thought: if he heard the groans of a door he would go for the gun. He concentrated on how he would move his arms, his hands. He would use his elbow on the man first. He did not think of the men with the weapons as large as swordfish. He thought of a single man and a single weapon and shut his eyes. He waited for the door. He thought he would never know whether their son had survived, and he bit his lip and tasted the blood and breathed through his nose and convinced himself that he was forty years younger, with the strength of a bull. He formed a question and repeated it in his mind: What are these things you drop from the sky?

No sound came. The door remained shut. The soldiers returned to the deck, carrying a small tin box, which reflected the sun across the deck. Opened, it revealed the remaining squid jerky.

"They want to know whether they can have one," the translator said.

"Of course," Bey said.

"Protein," the translator said. "They're lacking."

The two soldiers lifted a squid and raised it up like a flag so that the others on the boat could see. Then they climbed over the rails and returned to their boat. The translator followed them, but with one leg

over the rail, he paused to look at Bey. He seemed amused, grinning, as a parent would smile at a child.

He said, "Old man, you are far away from home."

And then, as fast as they had appeared on the horizon, the patrol boat departed, leaving a wake that caused Bey's trawler to tilt. He supported himself against the outside of the cabin wall. They sped away and the guns swiveled then angled up toward the sky. In the distance, under the light of the sun, he watched them tear the flesh of the squid and share the pieces and open their mouths to taste. One of them shook his head and spat a tentacle overboard. What remained uneaten the men tossed as well, flinging their arms, and the limp pieces arced up into air, fell, and then vanished.

Although it seemed like less, two years had passed since Bey and his son had walked to the river to repaint the boat. The Japanese had surrendered, and his son had returned bearing gifts in the form of unopened paint canisters. He had found them in a trash receptacle on the docks of a port on an eastern island, where he had spent the majority of the years, imprisoned. He had refused to fight for the Emperor. In a cave they had taken their time, pricking splinters underneath his fingernails, letting him bleed.

When he was set free and the prison camp abandoned, he took the canisters of paint, unaware of the color it contained. Altogether they had six tins, each carrying about two liters of paint, and they placed them on a wheelbarrow and pushed them along a trail that led toward the river.

The Americans had by then occupied the island, although in the village their presence remained unfelt, save for the occasional MPs that passed through in their Jeeps. They kept their distance, however, and it was as though there were two villages within one, brushing against each other on occasion. There were reports of violence in the central areas of the island, but here the villagers' lives were unchanged.

It took them half an hour to reach the river. It was morning still. The day was fine and the winds were slow. The trawler lay up on the banks, the same as when they saw it last. They had waited weeks to

make sure no one claimed it. Far from the ocean it looked ancient and awkward, its paint dull and faded, chipped in some places to reveal rust. It had been his son's idea to claim it. They would take trips. They would take his mother.

With a knife they pried open the tins, anxious and eager to see the mysterious color. They had agreed that whatever it was they would use it. White, his son had guessed. Green, his father said. Like the leaves. They bet a jug of wine. They squatted and huddled over the tins, which they had set against the riverbank.

What they saw was white, like a pool of milk. Bey was not surprised. He reached for his son and patted his arm. He said, "Sailor, you were correct," and he loved him and saw how he had aged, how his skin had tightened and his eyes were now heavy. He saw his fingers, the discolored nails, some of them still re-growing.

He never spoke of it. "We've missed years," was all he said. And Bey accepted this, as he accepted the seasons.

Then his son rolled up his shirt sleeve and formed his right hand into a fist, and, all of a sudden, dipped his arm into the paint canister. The paint rose, leaking out on to the grass, and it engulfed his forearm to just below the elbow. Slowly, he rotated his arm. Soon, dark lines began to spiral within the milk white, and then the lines grew thicker and the white faded, folding, until the paint turned blue, dark, like the color of winter. He then lifted his arm and the paint dripped down the shapes of his muscles and his skin and his knuckles like dozens of rivers falling into the sea.

The project took several days. And throughout it all Bey's son painted with a blue arm, and sometimes he pressed his hand against the hull, and from a distance Bey was unable to distinguish between the limb and the steel, and his son said, "Father, I have lost a hand, I have lost an arm, I am slowly turning into this boat," and he laughed, but Bey did not, although he smiled and let him know that he had heard. He watched daylight bend behind the trees and the current retreat and his son fade. The following morning, he was returning to the sea, to earn his living.

The next time he returned, they stood atop of the helm, which faced the forest and the mountains and their village. He taught Bey

the functions of the trawler and pointed to certain areas of the boat and named them as though they were countries.

He helped his mother in the kitchen and with the pigs, and then they took walks around the village. She spoke to him about marriage. She wanted him to meet a girl, from the nearest village, or someone she had heard about. She spoke of children. She asked him, as she always did, why he would not even try.

Bey wondered what else they spoke of, just as he was sure Soni wondered the same when their son was with him. They did not share. He wasn't sure why. It wasn't intentional. Perhaps because their time with him was limited and whatever words they exchanged with their son they each took and kept, like a treasure, so that the memory of it would last and hold until the next time he visited.

The only time it was the three of them together was in the evenings, during meals, and Bey and Soni spoke to him and not to each other.

For every visit he promised to take them out to sea, on the trawler, but he never did. He kept promising.

One evening, when Bey and Soni were alone, after their son had left for foreign coasts and they were preparing for bed, she said to him, "It is nice to hear your voice again."

He almost hit her for that. The thought occurred to him, of swinging his hand across her face, of his flesh against hers. He sat still without looking at her, shocked and afraid. He heard her undo the braid of her hair. He undid his. And then they lay down side by side on the mattress. She had bathed and he could smell her skin, the smell of snow. He would wake at dawn. He would take their trash and pour it down the hole in the washroom, for the pigs. There was the barley to tend to, Bey at one end of the field, Soni starting on the other. And then they would go to prepare their lunch and dinner.

He listened to her sleep. And then he rose and sat on the steps of his house, which faced the forest. Their son's world moved with him. In the mountains behind their village, the engine of a truck hummed. The pigs shifted in the pen. The sky was clear and vast and the stars were pulsing like beacons. The trees of the forest were luminous, silver. The air was cool. He had lived here for all his years. It was a life. There

was love he was capable of and love that was desired. His wife he had stopped knowing. His son, it seemed, left before he could know him. He wondered then where all the lost things in this world lay. And who, if anyone, ever found them.

They had been at sea for three hours when the first of the debris began to float by them. They were small pieces of wood, some of them trailed by shreds of light fabric. Over the starboard rails they watched them bob and hit the hull, some of them swallowed by a wave and then resurfacing.

Bey had waited until the patrol boat was no longer visible in all directions before entering the cabin. He found Soni, however, already standing in the room. They faced each other, in silence, as the trawler swayed, brushing water.

“You told me to wait,” she said. “Until I heard nothing. That’s what I did. And then I opened the door.”

“Like we had planned,” he said.

She reached to touch his arm and they stayed that way for some time. She said, “It is good to hear your voice, Bey.” And then she took his hand and squeezed, and he led her around to the deck where she returned to sitting close to the bow, where she watched the albatross hover over them.

But now they both stood, and before long the birds faded up beyond the clouds and the island appeared along the horizon, flat and dark. It seemed at first to remain in a fixed distance from them. Soon, though, as if they had somehow unlocked what held it, the land approached at a steady pace and they were able to distinguish the forest canopy. And rising above it, like great balloons, was smoke. Soon they smelled it, too, the scent of burning, as the winds pushed against them. By Bey’s guess, they were perhaps three kilometers away.

He gripped the rails and held his breath. It was far worse than his imagination had allowed. The sea, all at once, was speckled with debris. It surrounded the trawler, like cracked and splitting glaciers. He listened for his heart. He concentrated on its rhythm and told himself to slow.

Later, he would attempt to recall what it was exactly that caused his

wife to jump overboard. He remembered she stepped onto the rails and he rushed to her. He held her arm, said, "Soni," and she looked at him with an expression that was unrecognizable, one he had never seen. It was hatred, he thought, and she swung at him and he felt her knuckles against the side of his face, and then he let go and she was no longer there.

What was it? He wasn't sure. It could have been the island growing larger, the sensation of rushing they both felt. It could have been the evidence of destruction around them. The pieces of wood, the amount increasing the closer they approached the coast, some as long as the trawler. It could have been the clothes, a shirt, a straw sandal. Or perhaps it was the limbs he saw, a severed leg bent at the knee, two arms with their hands clenched together, the muscles still straining. The color of the sea, which shone copper.

And Soni now in it. He saw her for an instant. Her white shirt rose and blossomed across the surface as she paddled, and he heard her breathing, and then a cough, and he shouted, but she did not listen.

Then all at once, like an exhalation, dense clouds of smoke surrounded the trawler. The air grew thick and warm, the sun fading within it. Bey's vision was dimming. He cut the engine. He called her name. He heard the colliding of floating debris. He called again. "Soni." He stood there waiting, and it was as though the inside of his body was escaping. He saw the world as gray and vast and impenetrable, and he clawed at his chest and looked for the color blue. He thought of painting and stars and distances and what lay buried, and he envisioned them on a map, positioned like continents he would never visit.

The winds grew stronger, and the smoke, for a moment, dissipated. It revealed the island, its blackened trees. On the beach lay the remains of masts and keels like the spines of ancient whales.

And below him was his wife. She knelt atop a piece of wood the size of a door, its edges shredded like teeth. She grasped the trawler's ladder for balance. Her clothes were soaked, as was her face and her braided gray hair, her body and her flesh, loosened by age. He saw how the folds and the pigment of her skin held all the years, like the inside of a tree. She knelt there and the water licked her knees. In her eyes he saw clarity. She motioned for him.

Bey slowly descended the ladder. His toes touched the damp wood, and he felt Soni's hand press against his back to guide him. When he was settled, she pushed away. The wood bobbed and then gained control of the waves and their weight, and they were soon adrift among the wreckage. They kneeled and paddled with their hands, and their fingers turned cold and numb. They worked in silence. They kept low and remained under the haze of smoke. When a body passed them, they reached for the man. Some they held by the feet, others by the arms, neck, or hair. Whatever was closest. They picked them as if for harvest. The tide took them out to sea. Their breathing grew heavy. And, with all their effort, they pulled the floating men closer and lifted their still faces out of the water.

