

Futures

The woman who spoke for the sea

An element of regret. By Steven Fischer



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

When she opens her mouth, the ocean spills out. Clear, crisp, blue water as cold as ice, as inescapable as the tide.

I straighten my vest, dripping wet and reeking of salt and algae, the churn of quiet currents swirling at my boots. A ripple shimmers across the concrete floor, fluorescent lights reflected like stars on her surface, a cool breeze bearing the calls of shearwaters and terns.

“That’s enough,” I say as waves rise to my knees, hoping my voice doesn’t betray my excitement. I’m old enough to remember the ocean, but young enough that I never took it for granted.

Water drips from my chair, barnacles clinging to its aluminium legs. “I can’t help you if I don’t know what you want.”

She opens her mouth, and the sound of lapping water fills my ears. The sea begins to rise again, just like the last time I asked her this question. Just like every time she tries to speak.

“Stop.” A silver school darts past me, anchovies or capelin, or some other species I could have named as a child. I’m ashamed to realize how much I’ve forgotten. “Let’s try something else. Don’t answer me outright. Just picture the things I say.”

She nods, her pale hair stained with green, her coarse skin the colour of sand.

“This world was once covered completely with water, an ocean stretching farther than you could see.”

She closes her eyes, and her lips curl up slightly, the warmth of the sun streaming out from her face. I remember that smile. Quiet heat sprinkling down like an afternoon rain. The slow rise and fall of swells shifting the deck as old canvas sails flapped loose in the breeze. She smiles the way the sea moved on a calm day. But that’s not the only sea I remember, and it’s not the sea we need right now. “Scarcely two million hectares of that expanse still remain. Hardly more than puddles drying up in the dirt.”

Her eyes snap open, and the warm breeze grows suddenly cool. I reach into the plastic bag on the table and pull out a stack of photographs and maps.

She’s not the first messenger to arrive on shore. Nor the first I’ve interviewed in this small, spartan room. All claimed to speak on behalf of the water; some managed wonders as spectacular as hers. But in none of their eyes did I see danger, in none of their voices did I hear the storm, and without those they were not the sea I’d known.

I spread the papers across the table, water bleeding their ink like drops of blood in the churn.

A map of the Pacific Reserve, only the deepest trenches still blue on a blanket of brown. A photograph of a lysis plant, rusting pumps sucking dry a lonely patch of wet beside an airfield full of fuelling starships. A piece of fire-red coral from the reef behind the house I grew up in, desiccated and forgotten since before I was born.

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She had smiled like the sea that rocked me as a child, but now I see the first glimpse of the sea that I feared. At my feet, her waters begin to swell, her hair fluttering in a sudden, bitter wind. Her fingers twist like strands of kelp around the coral fragment, and she looks up with a face full of clouds.

“Why did you leave us?” I ask, her expression hardening with the betrayal of the question. “How could you abandon us without so much as a word?”

She is still for a moment, and I fear I’ve pushed too far. I reach out to take the coral from her grasp, but she opens her mouth and unleashes a squall.

Water fills the room faster than I can think, sending me tumbling like flotsam in her currents. My back strikes the wall as the lights above shatter, and I open my eyes into blurred, burning salt.

Across the room, she is floating still, the only fixed object in the chaos around us. She drifts towards me as my lungs begin to ache, thin

tendrils of green streaming out behind her, the fury on her face lit by flashes of lightning.

When she opens her mouth, roaring thunder emerges. The creaking of timbers and the cracking of masts, and at last I hear what she’s trying to say.

“Left you?” she roars, a hurricane in her words. “Abandoned you?” A current whips the photographs past my face. “Did I drain my own waters to make fuel for your ships? Did I ravage this world to make a way to another?”

As she draws near, something twists in the darkness behind her, a thousand unfathomed shadows in her depths. “I was here before you learnt to breathe, child. Before you grew legs or lungs, or opened your eyes.

“I did not abandon you. You abandoned me, twice. First to try your feet on dry, scorched land, then to spread your wings into an empty sky.”

Something dark and formless curls around my feet, threatening to drag me down into her endless darkness. As her weight settles like a

mountain on my chest, the slightest of smiles spreads across my lips.

This is the sea I remember. This is the sea we will need. This is a sea to be feared, beautiful and untamed. I close my eyes and take a deep, gasping breath.

When I wake, I’m lying on damp concrete, shattered glass scattered on the floor around me, the table bent and rusting upside down beside the wall. She’s still perching on the chair across from me, grinning, the sun in her expression once again.

“From ocean you came, to ocean you return,” I hear her whisper without moving her lips.

Inside me, something powerful stirs, like the tug of a current or the swell of a wave. I open my mouth and try to speak, and the sea comes spilling out.

Steven Fischer is a resident physician in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. You can read more of his work at www.stevenbfischer.com or follow him on Twitter @stevenfischersf.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Steven Fischer reveals the inspiration behind *The woman who spoke for the sea*

There is nothing more humbling on Earth than deep water.

As a child of North America’s Great Lakes and a new transplant to the coast of the Pacific Ocean, I’ve spent a lifetime learning both to love and to fear that most common of substances when it is collected in sufficient quantities.

Just like the lifeforms it ultimately birthed, water is beautifully, horrifyingly temperamental — placid and nurturing one moment, then mindlessly destructive the next. And given the fact that it covers 70% of Earth’s surface and fills the cells of every living thing in the world, what better avatar to speak for the planet itself?

When I think of the ways humanity has injured this planet, and the short-sightedness we’ve shown in those acts, I find myself wondering what the ocean would have to say to its careless progeny. Perhaps, if we are to right those wrongs, we need to remember where we came from and be a bit more like the sea — with enough fury to sweep away broken systems of the past, and the strength to grow something new in their place.

